Chapter 4

Peru, 1974

The final age of myths…

That is how one historian described the 1970s.

It was the final era in which “kings” and “gods” could coexist in the hearts of the people.

People of future generations, those perusing the literature of the Speedwagon Foundation: doubtless, you are aware that there were once transcendental beings who sought to imitate the works of the “gods”, and in doing so tried to become “gods” themselves. One of those beings found himself in a watery grave, and another was banished from this planet…

However, there are holy scriptures numbering in the thousands and priests and theologians who etch the words within their hearts. Just as one can feel the spirit of the watchmaker when they look at their own watch, one can feel the presence of the gods in all the world’s machinations. But that is only a *feeling*—only a *sense of their presence*. Those exiles made one misconception. The greatest show of power by the gods is not massive bolts of lightning, nor floods, droughts, or even mass-extinction events.

It is silence.

It is the quiet show of indifference to, or perhaps even complete unawareness of, humanity’s existence. Devout believers may say that the gods gave humanity free will, that they are always speaking to their hearts in omens. But you, humans of the modern age, understand that your heart is nothing more than an organ that pumps blood. The gods say nothing, not even to declare that they exist.

There was only a faint understanding of that at the time, but it was slowly beginning to sink into the public consciousness. Seeing it as an opportunity, the so-called “kings” of man sought power. These “kings” were not rulers who were wise or well-loved. Most were tyrants who did as they pleased. Once, a “king” pointed to the country next to his and declared that he wanted it for himself. His obedient retainers

humbly got to the task, plundering and razing every settlement they could find, destroying prospering civilizations, changing the calendar and laws of the land, and redrawing borders. The people acted exasperated, muttering about how domineering their king was, but in their hearts they snickered as they went surging into the new land. These events that have played out all over the world are now happening in your very own neighborhood. The greed of the “kings” discussed here is no different from the acts of the despots of old, who made their people suffer again and again and brought harm in their pursuit of new lands, but also opened new horizons. The two are like the true self, and the faint image of a second self one may see reflected by the mirror. The “kings” who emerge among you bind

you in unbreakable chains, rendering you immobile as screams echo through your mind. All they desire is to rule above all creation. In the not-so-distant future, the days of imitating “gods” will likely end, replaced by a world in which each “king” will rule according to his own desires and vie for dominance. To put it another way, eventually the entire world will succumb to this fate, thus ushering in a third world war.

Asia, Europe, North America, and South America all pretended to have their own great causes. The superpowers of the East and West pointed missiles at one another in a small Caribbean country caught between them, the yokes of colonial rule and imperialism came off, and good and evil became nothing more than another way of describing who was strong and who was weak.

At the beginning of the 70s, a man returned to his homeland, wandering a path that seemed to trace along the edge of this world.

He was born into a family that built a fortune off of the oil and mining industries, long before the 1973 oil crisis. His father died when he was 17, but as the third-eldest son, he did not inherit his father’s lands or mines. As there was no need for him to take up the family business, he instead enlisted in the military. He was assigned to the *Agrupamiento del Norte*’s[1] 33rd infantry brigade and advanced across the Zarumilla River into the enemy province of El Oro to fight in the Ecuadorian border conflict. The Ecuadorian border patrol’s counterattack in response to the invasion was brutal; he suffered illnesses such as malaria and typhoid fever while lurking in the tropical forests, and maggots infested the bodies of his own countrymen right before his eyes. Food was requisitioned, houses were burned to the ground, and people were shot to death indiscriminately. The wide-eyed stares of prisoners of war as they took their last breaths and the

flower-shaped bullet wounds that bloomed on the backs of boys' heads piled up in the back of his mind, but he was more concerned that dysentery-induced incontinence might cause him to soil his fatigues.

He was discharged after a ceasefire was declared, subsequently traveling to places such as Brazil and Mexico. Earning his drinking money as a day laborer, he read books and wandered the land without settling down in any one place. He also worked as a bouncer in a bar and extorted others for money. He became an influential *pollero*, smuggling drugs and humans across the border. He worked as a tour guide for travelers and on geological surveys as an assistant. During that time, he never gave his past or future a second thought. A man from an affluent family such as his would ordinarily never associate himself with the always-reeking back alleys, but he never felt that he had fallen from grace. Even when he was surrounded by wealth and women, he felt no joy; everyone around him looked like *cadáveres en movimiento*[2]. Was it caused by his military service? No. He had been that way ever since he was a child---before he stepped onto the battlefield, and even before he wanted to enlist. His inability to see his friends and family as anything but walking *cadáveres* meant that he, too, appeared that way. *My body is an empty husk.* And from deep inside of the husk, he could hear a mysterious howling that

1 *Agrupamiento del Norte* - Northern Army Detachment (of the Peruvian army)
2 *cadáveres en movimiento* - corpses in motion

sounded like a *grito*[3]. He was 50 years old when he finally found out the true nature of this "*alma gritando*[4]", as he called it, having returned to his hometown several years prior.

He did not return to the family home---instead, he found a new place to live in the suburbs of the capital. The man made appearances all throughout the country, sometimes branching out into neighboring nations. On that day, he went to Santa Rosa, a harbor town named after a saint, in northern Lima. Its west-facing windows overlooked a picturesque view of the Pacific Ocean, with vast, silver-glinting waves forever swinging like huge, slag-filled buckets. Skinny mother dogs and their pups wandered along the coastline, where clouds of sand drifted through the air like mist.

This was the residential area in which the middle class lived. He was laying half-naked in his bed, gazing out at the ocean through the

massive windows, when a visitor came. The doorway buzzer did not ring. He silently opened the door and entered the bedroom, letting in more sunlight. Still, the bedroom's lights were off, leaving the unexpected visitor's face hidden in silhouette.

"Who is it?" he asked without getting up.

Despite being addressed, the visitor was careful enough to not immediately draw close. He gingerly entered the room, one step at a time. The man was large and sturdily-built, with dark eyes glinting beneath faintly-connected eyebrows. He was not one to move his sharp jaw to speak without good reason. It seemed as though he could keep his mouth shut until the end of time if left alone.

"It's Santos, *Jefe*[5]."

He finally speaks. The man's voice had a slight tremor to it. His face drooped. He sniffled as if the dust in the house was giving him allergies.

Santos. Dos Santos. What's his problem? Why's he coming here with such a pathetic look on his face?

"What are you doing in a place like this, sir?"

"Exactly what it looks like. I'm enjoying myself."

"But you ought to return home soon… The car is ready for you."

"Why don't you take a load off, too? There's booze in the fridge. Pick whatever you like."

They stayed in this home for several days. The *espíritus* made time fly by in a blur. Three days had passed, as far as one could judge by the amount of empty bottles rolling on the floor. A

3 *grito* - scream
4 *alma gritando* - screaming soul
5 *Jefe* - Boss

uniquely offensive odor of dust and moisture had built up in the unventilated bedroom. Alcohol had spilled on the bedsheets, but he kept drinking straight from the bottle anyway, only stopping to crunch

on sliced pickles from a plate. He knew he ought to be leaving soon, but it was hard for him. He would have liked to spend some more time relaxing with the owner of the house.

“It’s times like these when I can really clear my head,” he muttered. As he spoke, days-old crumbs fell from his mustache onto the sheets. “There’s no better way to spend time than thinking on things that are impossible to think about.”

“Please put some clothes on, sir,” said Santos sternly. “This is not your home.”

“Think about it. Think about *guerra*[6] and *asesinato*[7]. What’s their essence?”

“I don’t know anything about that…”

“The essence of war and murder is asymmetry. They have never had equal actions and results. Did the soldier who pulled his gun’s trigger and burned villagers to death with his flamethrower go through the proper amount of self-reflection and conflict before he committed those actions? Try placing all the corpses on one side of the scale—what could you possibly put on the other side to make it equal? The soldiers of this country aren’t enough. A Führer with a small mustache? A head of state with the face of a little old lady? The same goes for them. One person could never be enough, even if they led genocides or political purges. All they can bring to the scale is feather-light narcissism, fanaticism, and stubbornness. You get what I’m saying? The scale’s never been put back into balance, not even once.”

As the other man spoke, Dos Santos kept his eyes fixed on his face. It wasn’t that he was engrossed in his speech. He was purposefully avoiding looking at anything else.

“That’s why we’ll never have world peace—homicide departments’ *morgues*[8] are filled to the brim, even today. That lack of depth and weight is a paradoxical weight that perpetuates the universal constant of murder. It’s that lightness you need to drag out your ‘*alma gritando*’.”

“I want to release it,” he said.

“You understand what that means, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“That *thing* chose you. That’s why I’m here.”

“There are some people waiting for you in their cells.”

“Oh, so that’s what it is? Guess I’ll head back then.”

6 *guerra* - war
7 *asesinato* - murder
8 *morgues* - morgues

His excitement showed in his voice. Rising from the bed, he told Dos Santos to get *it*. What Santos picked up was a crossbow that had fallen off the right side of the bed. The weapon was custom-built, with fiberglass string and a titanium frame. He muttered to himself as he searched around the room with bloodshot eyes before finally spotting it. Under the left side of the bed was a dead *pareja*[9]. He pulled an Arrow out of their bodies.

The rug was stained red with blood. The *parejas*’ stacked bodies formed an uneven ridge. Dos Santos, now holding his breath in an effort to stop himself from shaking, had been avoiding looking to the left of the bed the entire time.

It was a *madre embarazada*[10] and her *esposo*[11], whose ear was pressed against her exposed stomach.

Just below the center of her stomach was a stripe like the fiber from a string bean.

The Arrow had been pierced through the top of the *esposo*’s head into the *esposa*’s stomach.

The man put his shirt back on and fastened his gold wristwatch. As he got dressed, he studied the intricate patterns carved into the arrowhead, then the *pareja* on the rug. He sighed wearily. His entry into this house had not been forced—he was invited in. But in the end, the Arrow had not bestowed new life upon the *pareja joven*[12].

“I thought I’d try letting them listen to their kid’s breathing and kicking, but it seems that wasn’t

enough to get a reaction. I waited a while after shooting them, but nothing came from either of

them. I was hoping the kid might have one, but that was fruitless too. Nothing happened at all."

The Arrow had indeed pierced through the husband's head, into the fat and skin of the mother's belly, and straight through the uterus to end all three of their lives in one shot.

He had a preferred method of picking targets these days. He went out in sandals, went to a random home, knocked on the door, and used the crossbow to shoot the Arrow at whoever answered. Barely managing to keep a devastated look on his face, he left the bedroom for now with Dos Santos, whose lips were pursed. The furniture in the living room was in disarray, and objects had fallen from the shelves. There were two puddles of blood on the glass-strewn floor. In them lay an expired *pareja de ancianos*[13], both with arrow wounds. They would have been an *abuelo y abuela*[14] just a few days later. He had chased down each member of this house, aimed the crossbow, and taken his time in shooting them dead, one at a time. A framed picture on the wall fell, the pane cracking when it hit the ground. It was the last picture of the family that would ever exist. The photo depicted the two couples shoulder-to-shoulder, smiling brightly. Also in the frame was the man who would later join their killer: Dos Santos.

9 *pareja* - (married) couple
10 *madre embarazada* - pregnant woman 11 *esposo* - husband
12 *joven* - young (couple)

13 *pareja de ancianos* - elderly couple 14 *abuelo y abuela* - *grandfather and grandmother*

"This was my family's home." Santos blurted out the words as if he had been trying to hold them in.

"Huh? You think I don't know that? Don't tell me you thought you were just gonna be here for a little family visit."

"I came here to pick you up… I cut ties with them a long time ago." Despite his saying that, this was still difficult for him. Even if he was completely estranged, he never could have erased all the memories he shared with them. Confusion, turmoil, resentment, grief, and guilt flashed across his face, the muscles of his face twitching to a pitiful

degree. "*Ay, Dios mío*[15]," he said, his face turned to the heavens.

"It really is a shame. I waited all that time for you, because your ability was so unique. I just had to find out whether your bloodline, your relations, or the environment you grew up in influenced it. Seeing as your parents and your older sister's family missed the mark, it looks like it all depends on the individual. So, I think it's determined by whether or not you have an *alma gritando*."

Nothing could stop him from acting on his curiosity. He would hurt women and children, and neither age nor race factored into the equation. The amount of people he had shot was in the triple digits, but less than twenty percent had shown any results. In order to avoid the wasted time and burning frustration that came with each failed result, he had come up with an accurate set of rules to abide by when he chose his targets. Using a one-of-a-kind crossbow and the Arrow, he would reach into the empty spaces within other people and drag out the masters of the *gritos* they had never shown to the world. This was the duty he had been given---all other business, including the expansion of his gang, was nothing more than an accessory to this. According to him, these powers are one's deepest weaknesses and the universal lightness made manifest, and they will lead humanity to new horizons.

Right after they left Santos's home, dust flew up into the air. They could sense murderous rage coming from all directions. The pair was surrounded. A flood of Santa Rosa policemen aimed their guns at them from behind armored cars. "Drop your weapons and freeze!" Shouts came from the wall of cars and people around them. They knew there was a chance that snipers were trained on them from neighboring windows. It seemed every one of the officers in this crowd was aware of the fact that they were facing members of the *personas más peligrosas*[16] list.

"The hell's all this all of a sudden?!" he shouted, his voice growing rough. "You set me up, didn't you? You led the cops here like a pack of wolves, you son of a bitch!"

"Of course not, *Jefe*… I didn't know that you would be staying here for a long time…"

15 *Ay, Dios mío* - Oh, my God 16 *personas más peligrosas* - most dangerous people

“You were the one who stayed, not me!”

Dos Santos’s gaze had sharpened.

The man exhaled from his nose and shrugged his shoulders.

“I want you to be the one to take all these bastards out,” he ordered with an air of arrogance.

A whirlwind descended upon the street. Dust danced in the air. Houses creaked. Clouds blotted out the sun, covering the street in shadow, and the darkness around Santos and the man deepened.

“Bring out your *Fantasma*[17]. You’ve gotten better at using it, haven’t you?”

“*Sí, señor* Alhorn.”

An ethereal, powerful aura began to pulsate behind Dos Santos. Blood roared in his ears. The ground beneath him shook. It carried a sense of imminent, horrific *desastre*, as grand as if it would grab the ends of the earth and roll them together. And in the very next moment, like a single needle being dropped into a glass filled to the brim with water, the dam burst. A *grito* sounded out, loud enough to split the earth and shake the sky.

“That’s right! Set it free!” Alhorn shouted out the words as if they were an edict.

17 *Fantasma* - evil spirit

Chapter 5

When one first recalls a memory, it usually has no color.

The process is similar to filling in a *libro de colorear*[18]. After summoning a scene in one’s mind, one first recalls it in *monocromo*[19], then more memories come along to color it in. But this cannot be rushed—if one makes assumptions about their memories and hastily uses the wrong color, the memory is forever smudged.

For the *huérfanos* of Antigua, their first memories would forever remain in *monocromo*. They studied these memories aimlessly, as if they were rolls of 8mm film shot by an unknown creator.

One of them was a boy who had already lost his mother and *hermano*[20] before he could even count his age with both hands. He was taken to a church-run orphanage. His hair was an untamed, frizzled mass, and his limbs were thin like chicken bones. He was a sullen child and always on his own.

His father's head had been blown off in trench warfare many years before, and his mother and *hermano* later passed away in a car accident. The boy had been in the car's back seat, but he survived. With no relatives left to care for him, the boy was placed in an orphanage. He sometimes had fits, rampaging like a *tormenta* and crying on and on for three days at a time, then sleeping nonstop for another three. Even when he was settling in at a new orphanage, he would suddenly take a turn for the worse, rejecting the food he was given and falling into a depression. One day, the nun running the orphanage took the boy to the chapel and said these words to him:

"There's no need for you to put on a brave face. Don't worry about what other people think—if you're sad, let yourself be sad. Shed as many tears as you want, and one day that sadness will be something you can quietly tuck away deep in your heart. Sadness tends to become something you treasure, something like a memento stored in the attic of your mind. There's nothing shameful about feeling that way, but if you let it wash over you, it'll eventually settle somewhere deep inside of your soul. Sadness is an asset, but it is not your purpose."

When it was time to sleep, the *orfanato*'s lights went out. The boy was scared of being trapped in the dark. He didn't always go out like a light and wake up in the morning, and when he couldn't fall asleep, everything from the space under his bed to the textures on the ceiling fueled his nightmares. One night, he crept out of his bed. He unsteadily made his way into the hallway and slipped past the dining room. After he came into the entryway, he put on his tennis shoes and struck out into the outside world.

18 *libro de colorear* - coloring book 19 *monocromo* - monochrome
20 *hermano* - brother

The moon was still high in the sky, and the streets were completely deserted. The boy climbed a nearby hill and waited for the sun to rise over the horizon. This hill overlooked the entire city, with a large *Crus* built at its peak acting as a landmark. Someone had doodled in the sandy ground. He saw a *Crus* formed from tree branches and rubber bands found among the litter, and a *futbol* made from balled-up cloth and strings. After drawing a goal out in the sand, the boy tried to pass the time by doing penalty kicks with the abandoned ball. But it didn't make good practice, nor was it fun to play. Whenever he made a shot, nobody tried to stop him from scoring, and whenever he wanted to be the goalie, there was no kicker. But wasn't that obvious? Penalty kicks weren't something he could do alone. He needed someone to play with. Someone like a brother.

I used to think my* hermano *would never die.

"For now, you need to try and get along with the other children," the nun had told him.

But the boy felt out of place in the *orfanato*. She had told him to make friends more times than he could count, but he just couldn't. Nobody approached him, and he approached no one else. Nobody could replace his *hermano*, and he didn't want to play with anyone else anyway. But what about situations like this one? What about when he wanted to escape from that omnipresent sadness? What was he supposed to do at times like these?

Dense clouds blocked the moon, covering the hill in shadow. He didn't mind the dark at all. There was nothing for him to fear. The view behind closed eyes was darker than the night could ever be. When he rubbed his tear-filled eyes, he saw nothing but the blackness behind his eyelids. That was a kind of darkness that existed independently of light. True darkness. And in it, there was both weight and buoyancy, both thickness and thinness. The only thing that did not exist in it was color.

He thought that people feared the dark because they weren't able to see their surroundings when they were swallowed up by

the darkness. But with true darkness, it's not that a person couldn't see their surroundings---it is that the darkness itself becomes an extension of their eyes. It replaces their window to the outside world.

Suddenly, the boy heard a noise. He gasped, his eyes widening. Who could be here this late at night? If it was a *teporocho* aiming to molest a child like him, he had to get away. But the silhouette he saw was no adult---it was child-shaped. It was a little boy, smaller even than him.

Another boy, standing here on this hill in the dead of night.

Where did he come from?

Timidly, the strange boy drew closer. His steps were slow and measured, but as they gazed at one another, a clearer picture began to form in the boy's tear-blurred vision. For some reason, the other boy did not say a word, but the silence was comfortable for him.

He was just grateful that somebody else was finally here with him. He would later learn that this boy was born mute and that he was going to be joining the same *orfanato* soon. But strangely, the boy felt as if he knew what the other wanted to say, even on the very night they met.

The other boy picked up the cloth ball resting at his feet.

He looked at the goal. He probably wanted to say, *If you're bored, can I play with you?*

"Yeah, you can be the goalie."

That was Octavio and Joaquin's first meeting. In Octavio's most distant memories, as far back as he could recall, Joaquin was the only one who was in color from the very start.

When Octavio played doctor with the girls, Joaquin would always play another hospital patient or a corpse. The night they first drank, they both took off their shirts and danced by a bonfire as if they were trying to catch their own shadows. The two were always together, when

they lost their faith in God and dropped out of their seminary, when they climbed the ranks in the streets, and when they left their hometown behind.

“I hate the slums, Joaquin.”

Through their own efforts, they had finally managed to find a way out into the wider world, and now they were working up a sweat as salvage vendors in Peru. They walked the unpaved roads pulling a cart filled to the brim with junk, the blazing sun threatening to melt their brains like ice cream.

This was San Juan de Lurigancho---a *barriada*[21] east of Lima. It was situated on the steep slopes of a mountain with natural *andenes*, crowded with buildings erected by illegal immigrants. Its narrow roads and stairways seemed to weave through the gaps between houses.

There were homes made of concrete and brick, and shacks made with nothing but scrap wood. In the cramped streets, cables transmitting stolen electricity and water pipes intersected like a hundred coiling snakes. Clotheslines stretched from one wall to another, and chain-link fencing was installed for the collection and disposal of garbage. Here, there were holy images painted on the walls, a roadside shrine to the Virgin Mary, and dull-looking trees that looked as though they had never seen a downpour in their lives. *Moscas* danced in the sweet and spicy-smelling air. The ground felt like a soggy *galleta* from the incessantly-leaking pipes, with many spots feeling like they could sink in at any moment.

If one looked up out of claustrophobia, they would see nothing between the densely packed buildings but a strip of sky as thin as a razor’s edge.

21 *barriada* - slum

It was an impoverished *pueblo joven*, a “new town” in name only—a slum at the outskirts of the city.

Smoke polluted the air, making figures in the street appear depthless and indistinct through the haze.

Bienvenidos[22]—there’s so many echoes here for you to hear.

Vulgar crowds. Chirping swarms of insects. Squealing rats fighting over food.

Light and shadow. Flesh and bones. Breaking stones.

Sweet-smelling *daturas*[23].

Loud celebrations not held only by the living, but also the dead.

Excess. A deluge of color. Relationships and festivals.

Religion and myths.

Gods and kings.

Octavio couldn't take it any longer.

"If I knew it was going to be like this, I would've never left home!" he whined.

Joaquin answered with grunts. *I actually kind of like doing this.*

"How could you ever like this, you *tonto*? We're boiling alive, getting swarmed by flies, having our eardrums burst open by gossipping houeswives, walking in gravel-filled shoes, doing whatever the hell this is! It's every circle rolled into one! They think they can shovel this work onto us just because we're the new guys…"

It's probably just because anyone else would have drawn suspicion.

"Hey, you better not get used to doing this kind of thing."

Maybe I'm cut out for work like this.

"When can we just drop this act?"

Oh, I found a sol.

Octavio was bored to tears, but Joaquin had demonstrated quite the affinity for this "cover job".

He had started cleaning up useful-looking pieces of junk and peddling them on the streets.

22 *bienvenidos* - welcome

23 *daturas* - *Datura metel*, a flower also known as “angel’s trumpet”

Here is a selection of the wares Octavio and Joaquin had on sale. Five pencils: 1 sol. Five red

coloring pencils: 2 sols. New notebook: 2 sols. Handkerchief: 2 sols. Table salt: 2 sols. Five

socks: 3 sols. Assorted lucky charms: 3 sols. Stylish sunglasses: 7 sols. Broken flashlight: 9

sols. Used backpack: 10 sols. Some middle-aged man’s matchmaking photos: 10 sols. Virgin

Mary bobblehead: 10 sols. Celluloid *luchador*[24] figurine: 15 sols. Wig: 15 sols. Cool-looking

condor decoration: 20 sols.

They didn’t sell much. When they did earn money, Octavio quickly spent it all up on food and drinks. At food stalls, he bought such things as Inca-Cola, malted milk, salted pork in plastic bags, and hamburgers that tasted like minced cardboard, much to his chagrin.

Octavio always tossed the change they made to beggars, saying there was no point in keeping it when they weren’t even working as scrap sellers for the money. When he threw some coins into a blind veteran’s tin can, the veteran, who could seemingly tell how much money it was by the noise, brightly said “*muchas gracias*”.

They were after the locals’ information, not their money.

A week passed, then two as Octavio and Joaquin made frequent trips to San Juan de Lurigancho.

As apprentice investigators of the Speedwagon Foundation, they had been tasked with gathering rumors and testimony from the locals in order to track down the man who was sure to be there in hiding.

On another note, according to J.D. Hernandez, those looking to join the ranks of the Foundation’s investigators must first undergo a training period. First, doctors carry out a physical examination, eye examination, auscultation, X-ray, and a biopsy of the mucous

membranes. Then, they are taught the arts of self-defense and espionage, long-distance running, and boxing. Once one is determined to be competent in all of these skills, they are given the OK to join. However, Octavio and Joaquin, who had been allowed to join as a special exception for opening the door on operations in Antigua, were partially obligated to work on their education and training even while on the road or at their lodgings.

Octavio had found it irksome, but Joaquin put in an exceptional amount of effort. He reviewed his learning materials, obediently listened to J.D. Hernandez, and memorized the Speedwagon Foundation's mission statement word by word. He could accurately recite the teachings and creeds of Foundation founder Robert E.O. Speedwagon and understand the long history of strife that belonged to the family of Elizabeth "Lisa Lisa" Joestar. Now, they were studying all of the knowledge pertaining to *la Maravillas* that had been gathered up to that point. The hard work had caused their talents to flourish in the blink of an eye, and despite wearing loaner uniforms,

24 *luchador* - wrestler

the sunglasses and black suits emblazoned with the foundation's *rueda*[25] logo gave them the air of sharply-dressed *agentes secretos*[26].

Even Octavio, who hated being put in boxes, was happy to fit into this role; the desperation to succeed had lit a fire under him.

"Wow, I'm so grateful, it's making me tear up. I'm worn out from having to pull a cart all day long!" Meanwhile, Octavio had proven to have terrible book-smarts. "Come on, Senor Hernandez, can't we just study another time?"

After returning to the Lima branch, Octavio complained nonstop. An empty house in Peru had been renovated and made into a base for the investigators and researchers to pack themselves into. Documents, medical equipment, and research instruments had been brought in, and Foundation workers sat at their desks, looking to be deep in thought as they chewed on pens and peeked into microscopes.

“You need to follow Joaquin’s example, too,” J.D. Hernandez told him. “Your job description is more than investigating out in the field---most of the time, you’ll be working at a desk.”

“Listen, if it’s mission reports you’re talking about, Joaquin can handle those. If you want me to study so bad, why don’t you just hurry up and teach me more about what Lisa Lisa did? That miraculous power she was using.”

“That is a technique that requires strict, specialized training.”

“Is it true that it can let you walk on water and control other people? Can you use it too, Senor Hernandez?”

“I am not a user of the Ripple.”

“Is Lisa Lisa the only one?”

“The Ripple is more than just some trick…” (fix for fluency/accuracy)

Just as J.D. said that, Joaquin grunted, his hand shooting into the air. Playing out a charade with his hands and body flailing, he explained to Octavio what he had been studying. *“The Ripple” is an ancient martial arts technique, passed down in secret by the hermits of the East and later developed further by Lisa Lisa and her predecessors. With enough practice, those with potential can begin to learn its ways. By controlling their breathing, blood flow, and circulation, they can manifest a type of life energy that shares its wavelength with sunlight. Even more grueling training is required in order to be able to transform that energy into physical attacks known as “Overdrives”.*

25 *rueda* - (wagon) wheel 26 *agentes secretos* - secret agents

“*Bien trabajo*[27]*,* Joaquin. That’s why a greenhorn like you can’t do it.”

Thoroughly spurned, Octavio curled his lip and muttered objections under his breath.

“But we’re going after some dangerous foes here! We could never stand a chance against the users of *las Maravillas* unarmed, could we? We’d be better off getting some training in, and I want to use

those powers. I bet training us will end up being useful in some way, too."

"This isn't something like bookkeeping or arithmetic. If somebody had the potential, she wouldknow."

"But the senora uses the Ripple all the time in her daily life! Just the other day, when we were eating breakfast at the hotel, I saw her tap a raw egg in an eggcup with her index finger. Next thing I knew, she was enjoying an egg with a raw yolk and perfectly cooked white! Right, Joaquin?"

Joaquin grunted in agreement. *It did look tasty.*

"Right? So which is stronger, anyway? The Ripple or *las Maravillas*?"

"That depends on the strength and potential of the user."

"So, for example, there's nobody who can use both?"

"No. At least, not anyone who the Foundation knows of." The one who answered was not J.D.

Lisa Lisa had arrived. *Whoa, how much of that did she hear?* Octavio worried that he had worsened his rapport with his *comandante*, but Lisa Lisa was unbothered, telling everyone to get in their seats so that the briefing could begin.

"She's in some tall high heels, as usual… Doesn't she look like she's gotten a little younger?" The two youths went to their seats, quietly commenting amongst themselves.

Like an *abeja reina*[28], she rarely left the hive, but perhaps because of her joining the front lines, or her long, *plata*-colored hair, or the way she stood up straight, a vitality that augmented her graceful strength emanated from her like those very waves. Nobody could tear their eyes away from a woman with her elegant magnetism---not even the conference-hating Octavio.

"Now, let's hear your report."

At Lisa Lisa's order, the *abejas obreras*[29] diligently presented the pollen and nectar they had spent the last several days gathering. The first topic of the briefing was the pollen they had gathered

pertaining to *las Maravillas*.

27 *bien trabajo* - good work 28 *abeja reina* - queen bee 29 *abejas obreras* - worker bees

In charge of this section was Welmer Domingo of the research division. He was a member of the Foundation who Octavio and Joaquin had never properly talked with before. A rectangular metal badge pinned to the left part of his white coat bore an engraving of his name. His expression was composed and his physique not too shabby; he had the air of a former honor (lit. scholarship) student who could easily be found on the cover of *Forbes* magazine.

“Yes, *ahem*…” After clearing his throat, Domingo began his report. “We are in the process of investigating and interviewing the two superpowered individuals we encountered in Guatemala and carrying out a comparative analysis of samples gathered at each site. We have experts in every field, including behavioral sciences, psychiatry, folkloristics, biomechanics, and parapsychology discussing the case, performing predictive and quantitative calculations on this series of phenomena, and consolidated a qualitative assessment of the portions that could not be quantified .”

Octavio counted the number of times he muttered “uh-huh” or “I see” every minute, trying to see what pace could make it look like he was listening attentively. It was like school all over again—whenever he had to listen to something he didn’t care about, his mind would wander to more interesting subjects, like yesterday’s *futbol* scores or dates with the latest available *muchachas*.

“…Manifested abilities depend on the individual, and their influence, aggression, durability, range of useful influence, and burden placed on their user all exceeded the margins of error. There is one thoroughline in all of this---while it still has not been proven from a medical or psychological standpoint, every person who manifested one of these powers also reported seeing unique visions when activating them. Senor Hernandez will explain further on the subject.”

J.D. stood up and took over where Domingo had left off. “When I interviewed Fabio Ubuh, he said that whenever he activated his power, which he dubbed ‘*Senor de las Moscas*’, he could see a strange figure that looked like a shadow, like his own reflection. The figure was undoubtedly a real entity, but could neither be seen nor

perceived by anyone except for himself.

“Hmm… So you’re saying that this is more than a mere illusion?” asked Lisa Lisa. The report was questionable in its veracity, but she didn’t appear to be searching for a reason to shoot it down.

“According to Ubuh, the figure resembled a nobleman with compound eyes like an insect.”

“Wow, talk about delusional,” Octavio blurted out. An insectoid nobleman? That *tontopora* K’iche was just making things up. He couldn’t believe it if he tried.

Still, J.D. continued his report. “Fabio said that it was difficult explaining something like that when it wasn’t even visible to other people.”

“Something like this could be the result of visual impairments, a hallucination caused by mental instability, withdrawal symptoms from drugs, or by alcoholism.” Domingo lisetd off several other

cases. “But in his case, there was hyperactivity in the dopaminergic neurons of the mesolimbic system. Complex visual hallucinations could also stem from a condition known as Charles Bonnet syndrome.”

“The thing gave an uncanny scream and ensnared him in its power as if it binding him in invisible chains When it did, he was assailed by fear and uncertainty, overcome with a feeling as if his brain were erupting in goosebumps, falling victim to the temptation to do terrifying things.”

“I wonder if that was the manifestation of Fabio’s hierophobia.”

Lisa Lisa exhaled and touched upon to the other superpowered individual.

“Izahela Mena-Mena. That girl said that she ‘can summon chalk’. According to her, that chalk’s a magical kind that never wears down with use. It suddenly appears in her hand, then moves on its own to draw lines on the ground.”

“She, too, saw a vision that was imperceptible to others,” J.D. said.

“According to their testimonies, *las Maravillas* come from

corporeal visions, and they are capable of physically interacting with the world outside of their user. How can we counteract them?"

"We don't have enough examples of the kind of influences these individuals are under when they manifest their abilities."

"What we do know is that the Arrow is what draws them out."

Now they moved on to the second topic, their "object of pursuit"…

Aki Marcella de la Vega stood up to give the report. She was a chubby Japanese Peruvian who wore half-moon-shaped glasses atop a nose resembling an onion. The *hamona*[30] was an experienced archaeologist, having worked in the field in Central South America. Despite being only a temporary investigator, her understanding of this country's history and geography dwarfed the knowledge of everyone else in the room combined.

"We have obtained a photograph of Fernando Alhorn."

The picture which was presented had been taken about eight years before by one of the man's coworkers at a mining company. The black-and-white image of a man surrounded by *torabadores* was tinged blue. He had a chiseled face and green eyes. The contours of his jaws and cheekbones were sharp enough to have been forged by a blacksmith. He looked like he could be an actor in an action movie, a pimp, a street vendor, or a figure in Greek mythology. A deluge of blue tattoos made with the ink of boiled-down clerodendrums washed over his arms,

30 *hamona* - middle-aged woman

neck, and chest. Lizards. Eagles. Thorns. Lightning. *Las cruces*. Shooting targets. Hieroglyphics. Revolutionary slogans so long they may have had spelling mistakes. According to Aki Marcella, he was highly intelligent, had a way with words, and harbored a love of philosophy books.

"We didn't always have him by the tail, but we had intelligence agencies from every country working together to hound him for years," said Aki Marcella. "We know the basics now. He served in the

military as a teen, then became a drifter after being discharged. Ever since then, he's been dirtying his hands carrying out more crimes than anyone can count. He's a *pollero* who smuggles goods and people, turning robbery and kidnapping into a business. We've also picked up on unconfirmed rumors that he's been supporting radical leftists by poisoning and assassinating their enemies---if evil acts were suits of cards, he'd be aiming for a straight flush. This man came to know of the Bow and Arrow during a stint as a guide for geologists, and somehow, he got his hands on it through one of those channels. Now, he's abusing the Arrow, shooting people at random as if in search of some *sacrificial lamb sp*. He's trying to amass some sort paramilitary organization by gathering up the people who do manifest powers."

Octavio stared at the picture, his eyes raking over every detail.

So this is Alhorn.

The excitement sparking in the depths of his eyes did not go unnoticed by Joaquin.

Don't forget this. Burn it all into your retinas. This is the man with the power to subject others to a trial of life or death—this is the man with the Arrow.

"Unprincipled, frivolous, and hollow," Lisa Lisa muttered, eyeing the picture. "A shallow man in every aspect. But he is more than a petty criminal. I was an old woman long before you were all even born—I have confronted evils far more despicable than this man, beings who were catastrophe made manifest. But I can't sense any flagrant desire or determination from this man. Those empty eyes suck in whatever they see and never let it see daylight again. He's like the depths of Hell given limbs and allowed to crawl about."

"That's exactly it, Lisa Lisa," said Aki Marcella. "There's no telling what this man's true intentions really are."

"What I'm really worried about…" J.D. said. "is whether this man has awakened to a *Maravilla*of his own. Whether he's used the Arrow on himself."

"On that note, there's something I'd like to bring up that relates to an earlier topic," Aki Marcella said, urging the other investigators to start setting up some equipment. "We have several recorded exchanges

with Alhorn on file, obtained when he was detained by border patrol on human smuggling charges, stopped in an airport, or interrogated by other countries' police, among other things. What you are about to listen to is a compilation of his conversations with Peruvian police and the DIA, naturally edited down to only the segments that involved *las Maravillas*."

At Aki Marcella's signal, the open-reel recorder began its playback. Suddenly, an entire soundscape was revived. It sounded like the interrogation room in the border control offices. A tropical ambience of birdsong and insect calls filled the air. Somebody's breathing could be heard over the rustling of clothes. Documents rustled together. A man's voice sounded over the din. His voice was husky from alcohol use; he answered the interrogator's questions unflinchingly

Alhorn: I'm sure you just think I'm trying to give you the runaround or dodge the truth.

Interrogator: Ha ha… Well, it's true that anyone would think that, hearing your story about a *fantasma* possessing you.

Alhorn: No, I'm not saying it possessed me. It came from deep inside of me. It's a dark, murky thing like smoke---I can't get a good idea of its shape, no matter how much I strain my eyes. It's the source of the screaming I've been hearing deep down for my entire life.

Interrogator: It's not uncommon for somebody to think they can see a figure at the edge of their vision every once in a while.

Alhorn: This thing's a lot more persistent than that. It's always around. Once, it stood right in front of me, practically clinging to me. And I could make out a face deep in all that black smoke. A human silhouette. That's when I understood: the thing was made in my likeness.

Interrogator: If you weren't high on drugs, it must have just been some horror flick getting to your head.

Alhorn: No, it's more than that—it'd be more accurate to call it my doppelganger. It was my spitting image. Since then, it's been working for me as an extension of my five senses."

At that point, Aki Marcella paused the tape.

“A cursory listen to this tape may bring one to believe that these are nothing but the ramblings of a madman whose brain is so detached from his skull that it lies in the palm of his hand. But does the *fantasma* he speaks of here not match the description of the unique visions we discussed earlier?”

“He called it a *fantasma*, yet he said it was working for him,” Lisa Lisa said, her eyes narrowed. “I think we can safely say that he already had the Arrow in his possession at the time.”

“That seems to be the case - but his wording only becomes more oblique after this.”

Alhorn: I weave this sensory web, and all I need to do is hang at its center until my prey comes along.

Interrogator: I see. A spiderweb of sorts, then?

Alhorn: That’s right, a spiderweb. My five senses radiate out around me, and once my prey’s caught, they strike.

Interrogator: So the poor little bugs you prey on come to you of their own accord, is that it?

Alhorn: I know when there’s prey in my web by the tiny vibrations that travel down the strings. My world’s so filled with those sensations that there’s no room for anything else.

Interrogator: Are you saying that you experience a different world from normal people?

Alhorn: The two of us will always exist in my world. That’s why my thoughts and sensations got cut up and sewn back together, and now they’ve formed something entirely new. Everything sensation up until then was shattered. Now, it’s all been reborn as something I can perceive with my own skin, with my five senses. What about you? Can you hear the *fantasma*’s voice? If not, how am I supposed to tell you about it? It’s

impossible.

Interrogator: Enough already. I'm sick of hearing the creepy ramblings of a lowlife, evil *pollero* like you…

Alhorn: A person's inner self can't be said to be good or evil. It's their actions that are.

Interrogator: Either way, you're going to be in a cell for the next few years. Write your manifesto there.

Alhorn: Yeah, that's not good. I'd rather not end up that way.

Interrogator: Hmph. It's too late to be sorry.

Alhorn: There's not much I can do if my movements are restricted, even after releasing that thing.

Interrogator: Just how many people do you think have been victimized by the criminals of the illegal immigration industry?

Alhorn: There's thousands of voices like my own out there, just waiting to be released.

We need to prove to the world that we're capable of freeing them all.

Aki Marcella stopped the playback.

In the contents of the tape, Alhorn had wreathed his interrogator in smoke and used words to toy with him.

There were undeniable signs that this man's tongue was dripping with the poison known as evil. Even if he didn't unabashedly spit it at people, the corrosive liquid dripped from the corners of his mouth, whether he wanted it to or not. His booming voicemade his ears flare with itching agony. He was assaulted by a sensation like Alhorn's hands stroking the inside of his skull.

"We ought to assume that Alhorn knows about the Arrow's effects, of the manifestation of these abilities, and is testing his theories on live

subjects. A pair of special investigators working under my direct orders were in close proximity to this man—closer than any others managed to get thus far."

At Lisa Lisa's words, the air in the briefing room crackled with tension; deep in that moment's silence rested a single spark. J.D., Domingo, Aki Marcella, and the high-ranking members of the investigation team exchanged glances. It was an unforeseen situation and a pressing challenge: the chairs where two of those special investigators should have been sitting now was empty. Octavio and Joaquin.

"My pair of investigators and I made many trips to Peru," Lisa Lisa added. "After all, we knew for a fact that Alhorn was based in Lima."

Lisa Lisa, who had been issuing orders to the investigation team, had withdrawn from Lima due to certain circumstances: Alhorn had left traces inside and outside of Peru's borders, and she couldn't ignore the report that J.D. sent her from Guatemala. She had an encounter with two promising young men after witnessing the dire influence *las Maravillas* had in Antigua, later stationing them as investigators in Peru. But just before she was to return to the country, she learned that communications with the pair had stopped.

"They are a capable pair of locals who are proud to be part of the team. I trust that they would never cease communications with the Foundation except in the event of a significant emergency."

Lisa Lisa knew that Alhorn was twisting her arm. An attack on her personnel, who also accepted the responsibility of maintaining her security, was in essence a threat on her life. "So we're like her *guardians sp*," Octavio whispered into Joaquin's ear. "Isn't that cool? We're the *Guardaespaldas Lisa Lisa*." Even so, they had cut all communications two weeks before, and everyone had begun to assume the worst.

"Those two took over supervising the investigation in Lisa Lisa's absence." Aki Marcella seemed to feel responsible. "It's true that they went into dangerous areas of their own accord, but one day, they never came back to the base. They went radio silent."

It's not looking good for them at all, Octavio couldn't help but think. A grim look rose to Joaquin's face. Maybe they went too far in their search. Maybe they crossed a line and got too close to Alhorn, and now they'll never come home.

As time passed, as days went by with no news on the pair's whereabouts, the members of the investigation team felt they had no choice but to prepare for the worst. Aki Marcella and J.D. felt as urgent as if they had swallowed a bomb, and they looked as mournful there in their seats as vigil-goers. There was only one person who stubbornly refused to accept this lack of news as confirmation of their fates: Lisa Lisa.

She kept her eyes up as she asked Aki Marcella a question.

"Their last communication came from a slum in the outskirts of the city–correct?"

"Yes, we thought they had something of a base there."

"They are called *barriadas* here, yes?"

"Yes, as a term for a run-down, lawless area like that."

"Where were they investigating?"

"I'm afraid I'm not aware of the exact locations, but there are a number of *barriadas* in outer Lima. Using the evidence and testimony that they gathered, the two were fairly certain in their guess that Alhorn was operating somewhere in the area. However, he had bodyguards, as the place is a haven for crime."

"It's too soon for us to assume the two are dead. They're alive---I'm certain of it," Lisa Lisa declared. Her eyes showed no signs of melancholy, nor the glisten of forced optimism. She went on to explain to the group exactly why they had been appointed as special investigators:

"They are users of the Ripple."

Lisa Lisa spoke of how she had mentored them herself, training them to control the flow of their blood, and gone on to appoint them as investigators of supernatural incidents for the Speedwagon Foundation. "Up until a certain time," she said, "I was away from the front lines, living the life of an ordinary wife---so I trained the two to succeed me as the next Ripple masters. That way, even if I was taken captive and locked away with my life in the balance, the flame of the Ripple would not die with me."

“These are critical personnel who we cannot afford to lose, both for the sake of the Foundation and the future. It will take employees to conduct an infiltration of the *barriadas*, but please, look into Alhorn’s location and the safety of the team, and if it is necessary, rescue them.”

Octavio exchanged glances with the investigator sitting next to him, then turned to his other side to meet Joaquin’s eyes. *What do you think?* he asked silently. That look was coming into his eyes again.

Octavio ran his tongue over his lips. He was so anxious to spring into action that he had begun to fidget in his seat. The ominous anticipation on his face, as if he was gazing at a knife in the moonlight, killed any optimism Joaquin had.

Chapter 6

The next day, and the day after that, they went to the *barriadas*.

Te quemas… Frio[31]*.*

There were investigators looking in places other than San Juan de Lurigancho. That could mean that this place was *frio*. The houses and buildings crowded on the mountain slopes were colorful, but ramshackle---not one would have the lot size or grade to make an appropriate roost for a criminal organization and its *Jefe*. Octavio never tired of grumbling about it. “Even if this was just a *smokescreen sp*, this would never be good enough for a *grand criminal sp.* At least, if I was Alhorn, I sure wouldn’t pick a place like this!”

It was true that the place was a hive of criminal activity. In regime-controlled Peru, a country born from revolution, the nationalization of commerce and land reform was still ongoing; its population was steadily increasing, but with the blow its economy sustained in the oil crisis, riots and social movements became a frequent occurrence. *New slum areas sp* spread like wildfire at the outskirts of cities, and those dwelling within could find no jobs better than low-paid day labor, eventually causing them to drift into the *barriadas*. There, robbers, assaulters, thieves, kidnappers, and criminals of all kinds ran rampant. Any unlucky passerby or traveler could be labeled an easy mark and robbed for everything they had. One wasn’t safe, even in a taxi---a robber could jump in at a stoplight and rob them blind. Even in the hospital after the ordeal was over, victims could see their personal

belongings stolen, truly leaving them with nothing but the clothes on their back.

They pulled the cart full of scrap around so that they would be seen as one of the locals, not outsiders sniffing about for clues. It was critical that they be perceived as *transparent sp*. They could even be *translucent sp*. If they were, the angels of the streets would smile upon them. They would finally be able to pick up the fragments of truth that they had been searching for. Joaquin and Octavio---two men who lived and breathed the streets---knew that fact deep in their bodies.

From rumor to rumor, from tip to tip, they walked the streets like they were pulling themselves along a delicate thread.

Some of the roads and stairways winding between the roofs were too narrow to allow a wagon to pass through. Behind a two-story shack, a neglected, out-of-the-way plaza had become a feeding ground for the cats of the *barriadas*. The scraps were served in a polyethylene bowl. None of the cats were collared. Nonetheless, Octavio chased after the cats as they ran off, calling, “One of you has to be our guiding angel… Aren’t any of you owned by that Alhorn?!”

31 *Te quemas… Frio.* - You’re on fire… Cold.

Joaquin took a deep breath. *He must have some ties to this area, too.*

The air was dry and devoid of any humidity, but signs of life abounded. There were birds, insects, and other small animals living here.

Tracks left by some wild animal caught his eye. He stepped into a patch of smooth, pitted mulch, only to feel a sharp blade of grass to stab through his sock and into his ankle.

A cat arrived, searching for something with its ears and whiskers perked. Another cat came along, and soon they were in a spat. Joaquin witnessed it all. The cat bore three black stripes on its head like a display of its rage. It flew at its opponent, snarling. “Mrrraaaaah!

Mreaaaow!" The brown tabby it struck was a lost cat. Cats are territorial creatures who mark their *territory sp* by scratching trees and spraying; any who stray onto their turf are attacked without hesitation.

Humans will do the same to any who invade their land.

In the dead of night, Octavio too was attacked in this plaza, this time by thugs.

As he pushed the cart to where Joaquin had gone to buy groceries, they struck out of nowhere the moment he stepped into the deserted space.

About ten men came surging out from the darkness. Octavio was shoved to the ground, trampled by countless feet, and assailed with heavy swings from something feeling like a crowbar or baseball bat. *What the hell are these guys?! Sp* The moment he saw the look in the thugs' eyes, he understood. There were no users of *las Maravillas* among them. They were just local ruffians.

These were hooligans, *defectos* who would do anything for money---the kind of people found in every country in the world. They were broken people committing broken acts in a broken world, with tempers that ignited as easily as oiled paper. *This really takes me back. We used to run around waving our weapons and working up a sweat,* he thought. *So they're wanting to give the outsider a warning not to step on their* teritorio.

Octavio guarded his vitals, let them do as they liked, then struck. He grabbed a kicking foot and shoved away a punch hurled at him before getting to his feet. He started with the most vulnerable one, and knocked them to the ground one-by-one, then kicked at their faces when they were down. He jabbed their eye sockets and punched their mouths, crushing both eyes and teeth. He stomped on one's face and savored the feeling of his nose breaking beneath his shoe. Simulating each potential counterattack in his head, he gave in to his fighting instincts. This was how he survived using his connections to his homeland.

One of his eyes was drifting, and blood trickled from his ear. Just when he was too exhausted to keep fighting, another figure came sauntering into the plaza. It wasn't Joaquin---it was a local police officer. He reeked with a sleazy-smelling aftershave, and his police cap was pushed to

the back of his head. His two-tone leather shoes looked like something a gangster in a movie would wear. Octavio knew in an instant that this man wasn't just a cop on patrol coming to break up the fight.

"I hear the *chickens sp* have been poking around all over the place."

He stooped down to Octavio's eye level, flicking red embers off the end of his cigarette. His limp, slouched shoulders and strangely small head gave the overall impression of a cobra. Without a doubt, this was the man who had ordered the ambush. His moist eyes ran up and down Octavio's body.

"They say you've been running some dumbass business around here. You're free to do whatever you want, so long as you don't forget your manners…"

He made no attempt at hiding it. *First this clueless policeman sends local thugs after me, and now he's asking for protection money? It's embarrassing that he'll try to wring everything they can get even from a lowly peddler.* The officer bragged that it was just the way things worked around here for seventy percent of one's earnings to go to the government.

"C'mon, tell me the truth." The police officer lowered himself into a squat. "Someone sent you here. You're looking for something, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I've heard people around here need to be less worried about stray bullets, more about stray *arrows*."

Octavio stared him down. The moment he tossed out the bait, he was able to spot the way the officer's eyes gave the slightest shake in anger. *He knows something.* The hardboiled officer was involved in the dealings of local crime syndicates---not an uncommon scenario.

"The lord of these *barriadas* has been using the Arrow, isn't he?"

"I haven't got a damn clue what you're talking about."

"I want to meet him, face-to-face."

"You're just a *redneck sp* who's trying to be some kind of badass. Stay out of it."

“If you take me to him, I’ll make it worth your while. I’ve got some news you’d be interested in.”

“I told you, pal, I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“I think the name Alhorn should ring a few bells.”

“Tch!” The officer got to his feet and drew his pistol as casually as if he was undoing his fly to urinate. Turning off the safety, he pressed the muzzle right between Octavio’s shoulders. “Better not say that name without a good reason, pal,” he said, squinting one eye and stretching the other wide. “This could’ve all gone a lot smoother if you had just handed over the money…”

Instinct told him that this man had an itchy trigger finger, and a corpse would never leave this city. Even so, Octavio kept trying to persuade him.

“Huh… You think it’s really a good idea to shoot me here?”

“Don’t have much of a problem with it.”

“Like I said, I have info you’d be interested in. If you miss your chance to hear it, Alhorn’s gonna be missing out. It’s gonna be a big enough loss to sink him. And you’ll be in big trouble if you act rashly now and pop me full of lead, right?”

Cautiously, boldly, Octavio reeled the line in and let it dangle right in front of his opponent. He could never let the Speedwagon Foundation hear about this deal he was making. The officer was starting to notice the looks on the faces of the hoodlums behind him. *That’s right. Everybody talks.*

“If your guys have the means, you should try asking around. I only came to Peru recently, but I’ve seen some amazing things here. You’ll definitely want to hear about the *hombre mosca* and *oyos* as soon as possible. If I start spreading that around, word will get to Alhorn.”

Whoa… The cat’s outta the bag.

It was a gamble, but *te quemas*! Nearly a minute passed before the man put his gun away and shoved Octavio into his patrol car. It was no Rolls-Royce, and he looked fragile enough to crumble like the

filament of a lightbulb in the eye-concealing hood he wore, but he knew he wasn't being taken to the nearest station. *He plans to take me to Alhorn…*

As the patrol car carrying Octavio drove away, Joaquin peeked out from the shadows. The slums he looked over were veiled in darkness, a place where he had nobody to rely on. *He just took Octavio away…!*

He had gotten the gist of what happened. Octavio had projected his voice as he negotiated with the policeman, sure that Joaquin was listening from somewhere. He had played all the cards he could play, even making a deal that was a slap in the face to J.D. and Lisa Lisa, and now he aimed to reach his goal in a single leap.

"Ngh, agh, angh, ah!" Joaquin grunted after him.

Don't go, Octavio. You can't. Alarm bells were ringing in his head.

There was that recklessness and rebellion. The troublesome side of Octavio's personality was rearing its ugly head once again.

You can't get in such a rush, Octavio. Joaquin stood, and the next moment, he was running down the moonlit street. He scaled the sloping road at a sprint, running through the dust and smoke the car had left in its trail with the bouncing cart in tow, too focused to even breathe. He

climbed past the hills, the stairs, and the gravel. Higher, and higher, and higher, and higher, and higher.

Chapter 7

After driving up a road following the cliffs to the summit of San Juan de Lurigancho, Octavio was forced out of the car. After his hood was thrown off, Octavio got a good look at the view laid out before him.

Even close up, he couldn't see the building in full from his position---that was how big it was. Even if he tried to walk back on the path a bit so he could get a better look, the steep path would have blocked his view. The building was placed in such a way that it would have been impossible to see from the foot of the mountain in Lima to begin with. Judging by the movements the car had made, he guessed they had

come over the summit of the mountain to reach the place. The complex was clearly cobbled together, with wings added to wings and buildings bridged to buildings. Exposed ducts and steel frames, along with a tall crane parked nearby, hinted at plans for a second floor. The sight of the *barriadas* citadel wrapped in gray smoke from unseen depths awed onlookers like a crouching *monstoro antigua*.

This was undoubtedly some kind of hideout. One would be hard-pressed to find a place that made it more obvious. He was sure that it would be full of members of Alhorn's devoted personal army. He would likely have to go through five or six of Alhorn's closest bodyguards to reach him, and some of them could already be wielders of abilities like the *moscas* or *oyos* through the Arrow. And now, Octavio had thrown himself right into this hive of danger. *Cono*[32]*!* He didn't even have a weapon to defend himself with.

But he had come this far already---there was no turning back. Men resembling mercenaries stood on guard or patrolled the grounds outside of the citadel. Naturally, they were all armed to the teeth.

After bringing Octavio to the gatekeepers, the cobra-faced policeman left him behind to smoke next to his patrol car. He saw *machetes* dangling from the gatekeepers' belts as they patted him down, and even after passing through, he was flanked on all sides by escorts. The hideout appeared to be fashioned from a factory that was perfect for the role. Metal grating clinked beneath his feet as he was escorted past walls lined with exposed ducts.

He could make out more soldiers beneath him through the gaps in the grate, but they seemed completely relaxed as they ate and played cards around a table. It was an easy place to get lost in---the path twisted and turned, rose and fell, and branched off at points. Mercury lamps rose from the high ceilings, casting pale blue, flickering light all throughout the building. The citadel was too large for him to properly estimate its size, but going by its outward appearance, it was split into two massive northern and southern buildings connected by several bridges. He had just been walked through the northern building. When he left the industrial-looking corridor, his surroundings changed completely; now, he found himself walking down a beautifully decorated hallway filled with relief sculptures and display cases. Soon, they came to a massive set of

32 Cono! - Shit!

doors at the end of the hallway, blocked by a bodyguard. One of the escorts whispered in his ear, and just like that, Octavio was ushered in.

The room was immense, with a ceiling several stories high. Contrasting shades of *rojo* and *negro* painted the walls. Contrasting the long table that called *fiestas de cenas* to mind, the walls and ceiling bristled with exposed ducts and pipes, and there was nothing under his feet but cold, hard concrete. The stench of overripe fruit flooded the air, mingling with the reek of steel and tobacco. Light filtered sparsely through the spherical shade of a lamp resting on a desk. At the other end of the space, a barrier consisting of several thick, translucent curtains layered over one another obscured the view to the rest of the room. One of the mercenaries called out. Octavio heard shuffling, and he could make out the shape of a single man behind the curtains. Excitement brought goosebumps to the back of his neck. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, and he could hear a full orchestra playing the prelude to the *Cabalgata de las valquirias*[33] in the back of his mind. This was the man the Speedwagon Foundation was doing everything it could to find…

It was Alhorn, in the flesh.

I did it.

Te quemas, te quemas… Gran fuego[34]*!*

Alhorn looked over his visitor as he sat down on a woolen sofa, wearing only a robe on top of his exposed tattoos. Darkness dripped from him as he had just emerged from the mire of night. Alhorn beckoned Octavio with his right hand, and he complied, the hairs on his body standing on end as if he was approaching a stormcloud. Before he could get too close, the mercenaries behind him grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to kneel before their leader. The man seemed as if he was on some kind of peak now, his charmless green eyes looking down at Octavio.

“Who are you, and what do you know?”

Alhorn’s words pierced the air.

Octavio got straight to the point. “I came here from Guatemala.”

Alhorn arched an eyebrow. “What did you see there?”

“As I said before, I know about a man who can control *moscas de hierro* and a girl who can use chalk to summon *oyos*. I fought both of them. You’ve heard of them before, correct?"

“And you were able to see *it*?”

“By *it*, you mean…?”

33 *Cabalgata de las valquirias* - Flight of the Valkyries 34 *Gran fuego!* - You’re on fire!

“I haven’t heard of these *moscas de hierro*, but I know the *oyo* girl very well. I’m asking whether you saw her chalk.”

A-ha, so he’s talking about the fantasmas *from before,* Octavio surmised. *Good thing I paid attention in class!* Using his prior knowledge, he carefully laid the bait.

“It was hard to tell, since I was putting all my energy into avoiding all the *oyos*, but a certain organization’s researching those amazing powers as we speak. They’ve been after them for years… Oh, but I can’t tell you which organization it is. They’ve had me searching around for more info.”

“What group is it? The CIA? DIA?”

“I told you, I can’t say.”

“Spit it out, you *hijo de puta*[35].”

“That depends on how our transaction goes. I’ve always been a good negotiator, you see…”

You’re saying a *picaro*[36] like you really fought with those things? How are you here to tell the tale? I didn’t call you here to make a deal---I called here to make you talk, and I have my ways.”

Alhorn’s eyes seemed to search for something, his breath coming out of his nose in annoyed huffs. Octavio played into his expectations, affecting distress.

Blood roared in his ears. His back molars throbbed with pain. He

knew that the man's guards would turn him into Swiss cheese if he set on Alhorn like a howling dog and ripped out his carotid now, but maybe he'd get to be remembered as a *héroe*[37] forever for his actions. He had felt flashes of yearning for a future like that at times, but knew now that he needed to keep his plans more grounded.

"The reason I came here, sir, is because I have information none of the other guys could possibly have. I can count up how many organizations are after you right now. I'm putting myself at risk to do this. Don't you think some kind of compensation is in order for that?"

Octavio knew Alhorn was sizing him up, but he didn't look away.

"I don't want to be a stray dog searching for scraps on the side of the road, and I don't want to be a lapdog craving pets from my owner, either. I've had enough of all of that. For most of my life, I haven't truly been *alive*… but still, I want a life of my own. If you put two doors in front of me and said they led to entirely different worlds, I'm positive I would pick the right one."

Alhorn flashed a pompous smile. *Just what are you getting at?* asked his eyes.

35 *hijo de puta* - son of a bitch 36 *picaro* - rogue 37 *héroe* - hero

"I don't know if you're brave or just stupid, but either way, you're a hard guy to grasp. Sure, you've got a great physique, how do you plan to convince me you're telling the truth here?"

Perhaps he already suspected Octavio to be more than a mere undercover operative. After all, meeting people he couldn't take at face value was likely an everyday occurrence for him. A *persona peligrosa* who had his life in danger at all times had a sort of internal *polígrafo*[38] running around the clock.

"It sounds to me like you just want to double-cross me."

"What? Double-cross you? No, no, my pride as human being wouldn't---"

"You're nothing but a dog. There's no guarantee a traitor like you won't bite the hand that feeds it."

"I said I wanted a deal that would benefit both sides equally."

“So you’re going to start a new life. What then?”

“That wasn’t me saying I wanted to join your army. It all depends on what kind of power you can give me. By the way, I got this body through *futbol* and *lucha*[39], but do you enjoy sports? You look like you could get gold medals as a fencer to me… but *tiro con arco*[40] suits you just as well.”

“I don’t play sports.”

Alhorn’s lips curled into a smile. The implication was not lost on him. *That’s right. The reward I’m looking for from you is a shot from the Arrow. I don’t see it anywhere in this living room. It doesn’t look like you’ve got it on your thigh like a handgun, but it must be in a safe around here or something.* Octavio was so impatient, he wanted to scream. *After all, you’re a* loco[41] *who loves to shoot people with that thing at every chance you get, aren’t you? We both want the same thing, so just hurry up and shoot me!*

“Perhaps I’d try… *caza*[42] and *guerra*.”

“What? *Caza* I understand, but *guerra*, a sport?”

“Yeah… or at least, the new kind of war I’m trying to start would be.”

“Is that why you’re rounding up all these mercenaries?”

38 *polígrafo* - polygraph

39 *lucha* - wrestling 40 *tiro con arco* - archery

41 *loco* - lunatic

42 *caza* - hunting

“Soon, war won’t be waged between countries. It’ll be handled by private parties. These won’t be wars fought over land, borders, or national identity, and it won’t be any holy war fought by future martyrs. I’ll make *guerra* into a sport in every way. Sure, it’s a team sport in some ways, but at its core, it’ll be all about the individual athlete. Casualties will be like player injuries. So what is it that a team needs to win in the sport of *guerra*? Strategy, logistics, and ammunition

reserves. I don't have time to deal with the *mierda*[43] who shamelessly switch sides or don't want to become another weapon."

Huh? Did I just ruin his good mood? Alhorn began to get up, seemingly bored of the conversation, and Octavio hastily followed, asking him to wait.

"Come with me," Alhorn said, jerking his head. Octavio followed him through the curtains; behind them was a space walled with nothing but exposed concrete. This was where the stench of rotten fruit had been coming from. The air around him suddenly felt hot, and his heart began to pound hard enough for him to hear it in his ears.

Three large objects covered by a blanket caught his eye. "Are these decorations?" He wanted to be optimistic about what may lie beneath. But this couldn't be a work of art or a sculpture---not with how the fabric moved. He flipped up the right edge of the blanket.

It was a man in a chair. He looked to be an *indigena* in the prime of his life. The man's limbs were tied to the chair's armrests and legs, his hands immobilized by stakes driven into the wood. Lacerations and blistered-over burns covered his naked body. He was groaning and shaking his shoulders, half-conscious.

"I have a knack for keeping them awake. I figure out their limits and put them on uppers," Alhorn said with the same intonation he had been using before. "I cover them with a blanket like that so they don't go into shock. Smelling salts made from deer horns and hooves can also do the trick. That way, there's no need for *anestesia*[44]. Once the drugs kick in, that's when the fun starts."

Alhorn pulled the rest of the blanket off, revealing two more men of differing ages. He had scraped off their skin, ripped out their fingernails, and cut off their toes and an ear each. They had been sadistically tortured and handled in different ways, but neither one had any visible scar from the Arrow. *So they're not here for shooting practice? Then is this* tortura[45] *just punishment? Some kind of fucked-up hobby or game?*

"These three here were my visitors before you."

"Why did you hurt these people?"

43 *mierda* - shit

44 *anestesia* - anesthesia 45 *tortura* - torture

“Curious, are we? When I exhaust both their bodies and spirits, pushing them to the limit from stress or fear… those extreme conditions make it much more likely for me to get results. That’s my hypothesis, anyway. It’s a process of trial-and-error.”

“What are you talking about…? Anyway, it looks like I caught you in the middle of things.”

“Yeah, you interrupted me and made me come out there just to make me listen to a bunch of nonsense.”

As Alhorn spoke, the man in the chair slowly began to come out of his broken-minded stupor, a pathetic expression rising to his face as he saw that the same man stood before him. After looking over the tools and medical instruments in a tray by the man’s side, Alhorn picked out a hammer and nails. Without a moment’s hesitation, he drove a nail straight through the man’s thumb. A scream ripped from the man’s throat. His body contorted, sweat flying from his brow. Next, Alhorn grabbed a razor and ran it across one of the man’s cheeks, slicing off an even sliver of skin.

Every movement of Alhorn’s hands was skillful and controlled. Octavio wanted to stop him, but his piercing gaze pinned him down. He struggled to swallow back the nausea rising in his throat. *This is what I’m capable of*, Alhorn was showing him; it was all just a display. Octavio knew that, but the effect on him was immense.

“These hands are pretty strong, you know,” Alhorn said. His voice had a way of making listeners feel like they were being dragged somewhere by a powerful wave. “These visitors ran *milicias*[46] in Mexico. They had a whole grand scheme to band together and put me in chains. The three of them barked pretty well for me for their first few days here, but I had them whimpering like *chicas*[47] in no time. Now, all they do is grunt like animals. Their time will come soon, but I figured I’d push them right up to the brink. I think they’ve grown to like me; hell, I’ll bet even if I let them off this chair, they’d still wait on me hand and foot. Now it all comes down to whether they get selected, but even if they don’t, I’ve got no complaints.”

So this must be the beating heart of the barriadas*,* Octavio thought. *Blood and sorrow is manufactured here in these cramped walls, and then it all gets pumped out into the world.* He felt utterly paralyzed, as if a massive snake had coiled itself around him.

"I've shouted at these bastards about how they're just my *fanáticos*, but I don't believe in any god or religion. I'm not trying to imitate those fakes that people wrote those reverent hymns about. All I'm doing is listening to that *voice* deep inside of me. I've killed countless people, men and women, young and old. I've shot them, burned them, starved them, let them freeze, and let them drown. I've planted lethal bacteria in people like *plantóns*[48]. I often take pity on them. It's easy to start driving them mad if they're forced to hear the same song over and over again, and showing them some mercy on a whim is enough to break them. They'll bow down to me, and

46 *milicias* - militias

47 *chicas* - girls 48 *plantóns* - seedlings

wag their tails for me, and even offer up their spouses and children to me. You said there's an organization after me? I'm not stopping them. They'll just be following in the footsteps of so many others. I'll give you that reward you're after… once I'm done with these three. Once you've told me exactly what organization it is, and who is leading the investigation. Now get in line. I've got people waiting."

Octavio wanted to run as soon as he saw an opportunity. Alhorn's endless chatter alone was enough to make him feel like he was the one going through the *tortura*. The victim's screams, sobs, and wails never ceased. He begged for merciful death. Even then, the Arrow was nowhere to be seen. It seemed the *juegos previos* [49]of his screening process wasn't over yet.

Ah, jodido[50]*.*

El Jefe gave his subordinates a look, and they swarmed Octavio, shoving him to the floor. He struggled violently, but his captors overpowered him and forced him into a straitjacket. Alhorn watched over the process, his jade green eyes as dark as a bottomless abyss.

I was down before I even knew it, Octavio thought bitterly. Dizziness ravaged his brain and he fell forward, plummeting over the edge. *I should have backed up when I had the chance… but it's too late*

now.

They dragged him away and threw him into a concrete-painted room resembling a solitary cell. After slamming the concrete-barred door, they left him locked away from the outside world. *Ugh, this is some strict security…*

Now that he was alone, Octavio thoroughly cursed his captors. *Those people are scum among scum, nothing but a bunch of pompous madmen! What a bunch of* cannalas[51] *! So you're just throwing me into your storehouse, stuffing me away in your cheeks until you have your next meal, is that it?!* Fuck you, man (sp)! *Wonder if there's many other people like those victims of his* tortura*, people who he sees only as targets, in the same situation I am now somewhere in this citadel.*

In this cell lit only by the gas lamps on the hallway walls, he sat as still and silent as a stone for a time, straining his ears for outside noises. No shuffling or voices reached him. There was only eerie silence.

He knew for a fact that he was the only reason he was in this situation. *Yeah, that I'll acknowledge.* He truly had been ready to become a backstabbing traitor. Still, Octavio didn't regret his actions at all. If things didn't go as planned, all he needed to do was change his course of action. *My name is Octavio, and I'm a lot more than my Heraclean physique.* As his jailers had crowded around him to shove him into his cell, he had swiped the key on habit. After

49 *juegos previos* - previous games

50 *jodido* - shit

51 *cannalas* - scumbags

slipping his hand between the bars of his door and finding the lock, he opened it on his fifth try.

There we go.

The moment he stepped out into the hallway, he pulled right back in at the sight of several soldiers' backs. Slowly, he peeked out again, nose-first. As soon as the coast was clear, he dashed down the hallway to the next corner. He continued down the hallways of the barracks-like building, his breath bated and body tense. Water

dripped from broken ducts in places, and glass scattered the ground near the occasional shattered window. Thinking it might come in handy, he pocketed a particularly large and sharp-looking shard.

Luckily for him, the building had a laundry room. He changed into the same camouflaged fatigues all the other soldiers wore, wearing his hat low so that his eyes would be obscured. *That'll do.* Now that he blended in with Alhorn's soldiers, he was able to slip past the guard posted at the bridge leading to the second building. Nobody was looking too closely when things were as calm as they were. The guards were too busy trading dirty jokes and smoking to notice. *Bunch of* pushovers. Now searching would be *muy fácil*[52].

I'll steal anything that isn't bolted down.

Where's Alhorn keeping that Arrow?

For now, he'd try the places that were suspiciously well-guarded.

Hidden by his disguise, Octavio crept deeper and deeper into the stronghold. After entering the southern building, he scaled the stairs until he reached the top floor. At the end of the hallway, he came across what was clearly some kind of prison block. After ducking into a shadowy corner, he inspected it more closely. The area resembled some kind of warehouse, but one section of wall was made up of old-fashioned steel bars. There had to be ten to twenty armed guards posted at it. *With security this tight, this has to be the place.* He couldn't see into the room from his position, but he assumed through its nature as a jail that it wasn't the Arrow being watched over here. *That must mean Alhorn's keeping his "targets" here.*

So there's other people here in storehouses waiting to be used as Arrow fodder. People who could end up sitting in those chairs in that stone room… He heard Lisa Lisa in the back of his mind. Her strong, elegant voice echoed through his thoughts. *I haven't forgotten, Senora, not at all. Those special agents of the Speedwagon Foundation could be among the prisoners.*

Her voice and motivations weren't all that he thought of. *Tell me, how are you doing? I know this must be the first time you've been so far from Antigua in your lives.*

Octavio stayed there for a while, conflicted. He peered out to observe the movements of the guards from his hiding place, then pulled himself back against the wall, groaning. *There's no way I'll ever get*

through a force like that. Even if he managed to knock all of them out, the noise would alert the others, and that would be it for him. What could he do then? Octavio followed his

52 *muy fácil* - very easy

heart. He checked every window and terrace outside of the citadel, then looked into the darkness surrounding the open-air bridge that connected the buildings. *Are you there?*

Only moonlight illuminated the outdoors. The street lights were off, and he didn't have any binoculars on hand, but Octavio was sure of what he had seen.

You're here, aren't you?

He could see a hazy figure moving in the darkness. As his eyes adjusted, the crawling silhouette came into focus. Somebody was out there on that slope, 20 meters away from the citadel. *It's you, isn't it, Joaquin? Did you follow the police car I was in?* It was Joaquin without a doubt, but it was unlikely he could see Octavio with the naked eye at this distance.

Octavio hatched a plan. Taking out the shard of glass he had picked up earlier, he held it up to the gas lamp, making it flash. *I think this'll work.* They had loved playing spies or jungle explorers all the time as kids. In retrospect, they were rather silly games, but he had fun crafting roller coasters of drama with Joaquin. With Joaquin's inability to speak, the two of them had never forgotten how they communicated during games like these; it even proved useful in real life.

As memories of the past flashed through his mind, Octavio flashed the glass to make dots and dashes.

With every flash, he patiently strung together a long sentence. After a pause, he repeated it.

This is what he said:

FOUND PRISONER ON TOP FLOOR OF SOUTH BUILDING AND RESCUED STOP

Let's see… Did he get it? Octavio watched intently for a few moments, and soon he saw a flashlight go on and off in the distance. The answer was only two letters long.

OK.

I'm counting on you, buddy, Octavio thought.

Now it's your turn, Joaquin.

Chapter 8

Octavio was safe. Joaquin had read his message loud and clear, and the delivery took him back to simpler times. He had been wandering around the complex for a while in search of an entry point, but thanks to Octavio, he now knew exactly what needed to be done. He had to rescue the prisoners held in this complex. (W)

Unfortunately, the southern building was built along the cliffside, its outer wall flush with the rocky wall. It was defended by patrols and guards. Approaching without a plan would be suicide, but the southern side facing the cliffs was less heavily defended. After circling around a steep hill, creeping through some bushes, and scaling a chain link fence, Joaquin reached the walls of the southern building.

He saw a faint light shining above his head. Intuition told him that was the place. The building had to be about 20 stories tall, and the cliff beneath was so high up that he couldn't see the bottom. He hadn't brought much more than the flashlight from the cart, so he had nothing to serve as a tether, but this wouldn't be too difficult for him. He snuck closer, his senses on high alert. All he had to do was rescue the prisoners – if that proved too difficult for him, he could always form a plan with J.D. and the others and come back. That made reconnaissance his first priority.

He came up to the wall by climbing along a narrow scaffolding between the cliff and wall (FIX).

After a full-body warmup, he threw off both shoes.

Let's do this.

With a count of *uno, dos, tres,* he grasped at two bumps on the wall. He hoisted himself up and dug his feet into cracks in the brick, then gripped the rim of a duct higher up. Hidden under the cover of night, he began to scale the vertical surface. As if he was challenging the fortress of the *barriadas*, he climbed higher, and higher, and higher, and higher, and higher. (W)

The phantom thief Joaquin was about to strike. He put his shoulders

into each movement, the delicate yet supple muscles bunching with the effort. He had already climbed three or four stories. The frame of the building was exposed at points, with metal support poles embedded in the wall and connected by bars. He used these bars like a ladder when he could, otherwise pulling himself along cracks in the wall to climb higher, and higher, and higher, and higher, and higher.

I'm a born climber.

If the wall's got cracks and bumps like this on it, I don't need a tether.

In his position, Octavio would probably say, "I'm a *free climbing sp* king! I can even scale a twenty-story building!"

He got a bit ahead of himself and climbed onto a pipe that wasn't bolted tight to the wall, sending his right foot slipping. If he hadn't had a good grip on his right hand, he would have fallen. *Don't get so worked up,* he chided himself. One screw-up, and he'd fall straight off the cliff.

Sweat trickled down his back. He tried not to look down, but he knew he had to be high up now. But for some reason, the light marking his goal didn't seem to have gotten any closer. Had the height made his body freeze?

The night darkened suddenly, obscuring the texture of the wall – perhaps clouds were rolling in. He reached up in an effort to stop himself from slipping, feeling around for something he could grab on to. Just then, his finger brushed something. *Oh, gross, it's all sticky.* To make matters worse, his finger didn't come unstuck as soon as he pulled away. He could see countless, long threads of some thick, goopy substance like sap stretched between his hand and the wall. Upon closer inspection, he spotted more of this transparent material that resembled a melted condom on the wall near the right side of his face. It was as grippy as birdlime, thicker than threads of insect silk but thinner than pipes. The wall was covered in a net of it. Then something strange happened. The fingertip that had touched the sticky substance lit up in a fluorescent yellow-green, as if it had been covered in glow-in-the-dark paint. The mesh on the wall began to glow the same color, looking like it was floating in the darkness. He heard an unnerving shout he couldn't place.

Écue-Yamba-Ó.

He was sure that was what he had heard. Écue-Yamba-Ó? That wasn't Spanish*. Écue-Yamba-Ó… Écue-Yamba-Ó…* It was like a *chant sp* from some strange tribe, or the cry of an animal. It sounded like a real voice, but there was a hard, artificial edge to it, like the sound of an air-raid siren. The sound echoed incessantly, only fanning the flames of Joaquin's sense of danger more. *Écue-Yamba-Ó. Écue-Yamba-Ó. Écue-Yamba-Ó*.

Clearly, it was a threat. It sounded not like a scream, but something corrosive, like the neurotoxic venom squirted from the tip of a scorpion's tail at intruders.

The glowing grid moved as if it was alive*. Écue-Yamba-Ó. Écue-Yamba-Ó*. Joaquin had gotten a grip on the situation, whether he liked it or not. *I touched some sort of sensor, and now I'm under attack from some* Maravilla, *just like what happened with Hopscotch.*

Perfect timing! Just when I'm trying to cling to a vertical wall! No, that's exactly why I was attacked. Somehow, the wall covered in the glowing grid began to tilt. It was no illusion. He could feel the way gravity's grip on him changed. The entire building was beginning to angle itself towards the cliff.

If this keeps up, I'm going to fall.

If I keep trying to cling to this wall, I'm going to fall.

Stuck in this impossible position, Joaquin jumped up to a duct to his left. But he found himself touching the glowing, sticky web even there. Now, it was not only sticky, but also barbed. The invader had leapt straight into the sharp points.

"Nh, nnnagh, nnnnagh, aaaaaagh…!!"

He felt his palms, fingertips, wrists, arms, and neck all being stabbed. Hooks dug into his skin, splitting it open. Joaquin forced himself to keep crawling one from grip to grip, from foothold to foothold, even as chunks of his body were hacked off; even as it seemed useless to climb as the wall kept slanting.

"Ngh, ngh, ngggh!"

This hurts like hell. I can't climb, and I can't get there on foot. What am I supposed to do?

His body was covered in blood and glowing goo.

It wasn't an illusion. Joaquin tried to recall everything he had learned. There was no way it was some magician was tricking his senses. After all, closing his eyes did nothing to alleviate the pain, and gravity kept tugging him away from the wall. *I'm being attacked by a* Maravilla*. If that's the case, based on what happened with Fabio and Izahela, the user of this ability has to be nearby.*

But where? There was nobody climbing the wall except for Joaquin, and he couldn't see anybody peering out from the windows.

There was no limit to the kind of powers *las Maravillas* could have. "Écue-Yamba-Ó", as Joaquin had decided to call it, appeared to spread its sticky net on the side of buildings and attack anybody who touched them. It used sharp barbs on its tendrils and tilted the wall itself in an effort to shake off intruders. It was an ability that worked like some sort of *sistema de seguridad*. He assumed the net had been spread over all sides of the building, not just the southern wall. It seemed unlikely for the user of a power with such a wide range to be anywhere nearby. Perhaps the ability would automatically activate when something tripped its sensors no matter where the user was, whether they were awake, or whether they even knew what was happening.

Or perhaps there was a *fantasma* nearby that only the victim could see…

What can I see, and what can I not see?

What's visible, and what's invisible?

Where are we supposed to draw the line?

Joaquin was hanging from two grips now, unable to climb higher or retreat to the ground below. The wall had tilted nearly 120 degrees towards the cliff. He was going to fall. A fall from this angle would kill him, and unluckily for him, there were no ducts he could grab onto to

stop his fall. He would plummet straight to the bottom of the cliff. If he let go now, it'd all be over for him.

His fingertips were in tatters, and blood welled up from puncture wounds all over his arms and wrists. His arms and legs were beginning to go numb from the strain. Écue-Yamba-Ó's warning calls continued. The attack would probably continue as long as the voice played. At this point, fleeing was the best option, but fleeing equaled death. His only option now was to climb to the top, just as he had intended.

Joaquin closed his eyes one more time. He made his right hand let go of the duct he had been hanging onto and tested the sticky goop, churning it in his fingers. He grabbed back onto the edge and did the same thing with his left hand. Breathing deeply, he brought his dangling lower body back up to the wall with his hands. *Just between you and me, I'm pretty strong when push comes to shove.*

Although I've never been able to tell anybody that.

I've never even told Octavio.

When one of my five senses is stolen away, when I'm covered in wounds, my senses come back stronger than ever.

I can see light, even in the dark. I can breathe underwater. It feels like I can go wherever I want.

My nerves expand out into the world like a thousand needles, like capillaries. I can sense everything – the tiniest dust and particles, the faintest sounds and smells.

I guess I become stronger against adversity.

He didn't have many reasons to display this power in his hometown, but now things were different. He had come out into the wider world as a member of the Speedwagon Foundation. Joaquin held his breath, crouching against the wall. He didn't blink. Not even the hairs in his nose twitched. He let his mind become utterly silent. The next moment, he unleashed his power. Kicking out against the tilted wall, he made a huge leap to reach a pole to his right. The pain from the barbed wires had vanished entirely while he was stock-still. The wall was already at a 140- or 150-degree angle, sending blood and sweat dripping from his eyes towards his ears. Still, he stilled himself again,

unbreathing, unblinking, and turned his whole body into a spring. He bounced higher, and higher, and higher, and higher, and higher.

He could naturally sense the tiny gaps and bumps in the blocks between him and the next duct or drainpipe.

Bracing himself against a millimeters-thick divot, he gathered the strength for his next jump.

His muscles interlocked, forming powerful *músculos en movimiento*.

The nerves outside of his body formed a track for his climbing. (f)

Don't breathe. Don't blink. Just keep climbing. It appeared the building curled more the higher he got – it was almost at 180 degrees, bringing it parallel to the ground and turning the wall into a ceiling. Gravity tugged at Joaquin, but he twisted his arms, holding tight to the ceiling. He brought his elbows out to his sides and adjusted his footing keep his balance. After grabbing onto the *escalera* and letting go of the wall, he swung across it like monkey bars. He had finally reached his destination, but he realized the transom window the light was shining from was fixed; he couldn't open it. But he could see a rectangular vent past it. He swung on the bar like it was a trapeze to kick in the cover, then barely managed to squeeze into the duct. Using his hands as makeshift suction cups, he made his way back onto horizontal ground just as the building folded in on itself.

Amazing, right?

Joaquin let out the breath he had been holding in. The screaming pain in his muscles and all-over soreness came back with a vengeance.

I managed to thwart Écue-Yamba-Ó's attempts at interference and finish the climb… I'm gonna tell Octavio I'm the king of escalada libre *the next time I see him!* Even Joaquin himself couldn't quite grasp the incredible series of events that had led to his infiltration of the citadel.

Just as he crawled up to the other end of the duct, he felt a dizziness like his inner ear had gone haywire, signaling that the world was right-side-up again. There was no way of knowing for sure whether Écue-Yamba-Ó had any purpose beyond doing everything it could to deter intruders, but he at least knew that he had gotten through that stage. He wiped the last bits of goop off his fingertips, and Écue-Yamba-Ó's siren finally went silent.

Joaquin peered into the room from the duct, controlling his breathing. His senses spread throughout the room. He detected about 15 prisoners under blankets in the dimly-lit room. It seemed to be less of a jail and more of a quarantine ward. There were two rows of bare mattresses, and the odors of straw, disinfectant, and scrap iron filled the air. He observed the room for a while, and when he found no signs of Alhorn's soldiers in the room, Joaquin quietly took off the grate and dropped into the room.

Several people noticed a man had fallen from the ceiling and sat up to look, but the majority just stayed in their beds. *Are they sleeping, or are they too weak to get up?*

Some of them were hooked up heart and breathing monitors, and others had IV lines. *So it* is *an infirmary.* On the other side of the unmanned door, he could hear guards talking. Staying low to the ground so that he would be harder to see, Joaquin crept into the shadows of the beds so he could check on the prisoners.

"Are you with the Speedwagon Foundation?" one of them asked quietly. She had noticed the logo on Joaquin's uniform.

It was the *rueda*, the symbol of the Speedwagon Foundation. The *mujer joven* wore a baseball cap with the same logo. She shakily rose into a sitting position when she saw Joaquin and asked if he could undo the bindings on her hands.

"You're new, aren't you?"

Joaquin grunted, pointed to his mouth, and shook his head.

"Oh, you can't speak? What happened to you? You're covered in wounds…"

He grunted again, using his fingers to pantomime his skin getting cut.

"Are you saying you got attacked by a *Maravilla* on your way in here?"

Joaquin grunted.

This woman definitely seemed to be up to speed. "So you came here all alone and risked your life to save us, huh?"

Her large pupils shone with tears. As soon as he finished untying her hands, she took off her hat and shook his hand. The woman looked like a drawing in only *negro* and *blanco*. Everything about her looked brittle, from her pale but well-arranged face to her long, slender neck. Joaquin knew from a glance that this woman was far from average in many ways. She wore something resembling an elbow-length *guante de brazo* on one arm, leaving over her fingers exposed. Her bangs looked strangely unkempt, as if she had cut the right side shorter than the left. She wiped the grime off her face, but a single streak of soot remained on her cheek.

Wary of their conversation being overheard by the guards, Joaquin took out a pen and some paper he had on him for them to communicate with. Sasha Loggins explained that she was a Sephardic Jew who had deep ties to Lisa Lisa stretching back to her own *abuelo*'s time. Trained by Lisa Lisa in Hamon, she had become the woman's most trusted bodyguard. But now she looked battered, exhausted, and aimless, her head hanging low. She was like a damaged piece of driftwood floating aimlessly along the shore.

Things that had happened to them. Things they needed to do. There were so many things they needed to share with each other before it was too late. Sasha quickly adapted to communicating on paper.

Sasha: That was definitely some kind of ability in action. Good job getting through it on your own.

Joaquin: But I wasn't able to capture its user.

Sasha: There's another user here that Alhorn groomed to be his apprentice.

Joaquin: We need to get out of here. Weren't there two special investigators, though?

Sasha: He didn't make it.

Sasha looked to the man lying in the bed on her right. He was tall enough for his feet to dangle over the side of the bed, but no breaths or twitches moved the blanket that covered his body (W). The last

tiny embers of his life had burned out.

“That’s Gustave. Gustave Shaulo Messina.”

Sasha spoke as if she was engraving his epitaph.

Sasha: He was holding on, but he died yesterday.

Joaquin: Did Alhorn get him?

Sasha: When we came here together, we were no match for the *Maravilla* of Alhorn’s right-hand man. After that, we were brought here. I couldn’t carry him anywhere in those restraints. We couldn’t have escaped if we tried.

Joaquin: Still, you need to get out of here. You could be the Arrow’s next target.

Sasha: *No es eso*. I couldn’t be.

Joaquin: *¿Qué?*

Sasha: We were here so they could observe us after we got shot. Look at this.

Sasha pulled down her shirt around her chest with no warning.

Joaquin’s heart pounded with embarrassment as he was showed the scar on her porcelain skin. It looked to have come from a puncture wound above her heart and between her breasts. *Alhorn already shot her with his Arrow…* She explained that both her and Gustav had been shot at the same time. In the end, Sasha Loggins had survived, but Gustav Messina had not.

Sasha: Everyone in here is the same way. This is a quarantine where they lock away people to see how they do after being shot by the Arrow. Five out of ten people will die. Another three

will die tomorrow. In the end, only one or two people will remain.

Joaquin: Have you manifested anything yet?

Sasha: I don't know. I've been watching him getting weaker and weaker, so I wasn't focusing on it… but I feel like I can see them now.

Joaquin: Seeing *fantasmas*?

Sasha: *Fantasmas*… I guess you could call them that. Wielders of *las Maravillas* have something like a shadow or spirit that takes shape and stands beside them…

Joaquin: I was told all about those at the Foundation. So you *can* see them.

Sasha: They can look animalistic, humanoid, amorphous, monstrous… No two people have the same one, but they're visible to more people than just their users. It seems people who can summon *Fantasmas* can see other people's *Fantasmas*.

Joaquin: How many of them have you seen so far?

Sasha: Just out of the people I've seen coming in and out of this room, I'd say *diez*.

There's probably more.

Joaquin: That many?! Have you seen Alhorn's?

Sasha: I don't know. Maybe I did. Whatever it is, it's obvious that man's a huge deviant – he's an agitator. He's obsessed with increasing the amount of *Fantasmas* in the world with that Arrow, and he's forming an army that listens only to his orders. I need to tell Lisa Lisa about everything I've seen here.

Joaquin: How are you going to get out of here?

Sasha: You freed me, Joaquin. My eyes will be your radar.

Joaquin: But there's lots of guards out there in the halls.

Sasha: ***No hay problema*****.**

After saying a silent prayer for her fallen friend, Sasha turned to Joaquin and whispered, "*Vuelvo enseguida*." She put her hat back on and stood up. Her face looked as tense as a complex crystal (W).

Chapter 9

Men hit the metal-grated floor, one after the other.

Thump. Thump. They fell like over-stuffed duffel bags. No bullet holes or wounds were visible on their bodies. No blood dripped onto the floor. Despite their lack of external injuries, they lay collapsed in a heap, completely knocked out.

"Overdrive…"

Sasha Loggins focused on her breathing. Energy burst forth from her newly freed hands, shaking the soldiers' bodies with just a touch. The Ripple made their blood vibrate, stopping its normal flow and scrambling both their bodily functions and consciousnesses (W). Hamon could be sent into kicks, punches, or direct contact, but skilled users like her could even send Hamon flowing through objects. Wrapped around the *guante de brazo* on her right arm was a wide braid that she could unravel to her desired length and use as a *latigo*. At its full length, it was somewhere between ten and twenty meters. This rope, which could also be thought of as a particularly long missanga bracelet, was said to be made of the same rare material as Lisa Lisa's scarf. Looking at her now, it was difficult to imagine she had just escaped several days' captivity. Her breathing was controlled, her movements were smooth, and the energy she discharged repelled enemy counterattacks. As Joaquin watched her jump off of a wall, moving at a dizzying speed, he found himself wondering if Lisa Lisa had been the same way when she was young.

"If you can walk, come with me. Make an orderly line and follow me (CH). I'll come back for everyone else soon – hang on just a little longer."

Only a couple of minutes later, the guards were all face-down on the ground. Sasha and Joaquin led seven or eight prisoners deeper into

the building. The hallway was locked down, with guards posted at checkpoints and stairways. They needed to go downstairs and head towards the north side, but how many fights would they be forced into before they got there? “We need to try and avoid confrontations as much as we can,” Sasha said. “We might come across that other ability wielder on the way out. If that happens, I have no idea how things could play out.”

They made towards the exit in grave silence, sacrificing time to minimize their risk of encountering any guards. Communicating via signals and creeping from one shadow to another, they came across an unmanned spiral stairway and silently made their way down, one floor at a time. Joaquin was skilled in stealth operations such as these, but Sasha being Sasha, she could practically become invisible. She stalked the halls as silently as a snow leopard, even her breathing not making a sound. The victims of the Arrow stayed alert as well and quietly followed the leaders.

Maybe we can make it. Maybe we can get out of here without a fight. Just as things were beginning to look up, they heard a shout from behind them.

“Hey!”

When they turned around, they saw Octavio waving at them, clad in camouflage fatigues. He came running over as soon as he spotted Joaquin, his boots noisily hitting the floor.

Shhh! Shhh! Everyone’s going to hear you if you yell and stomp like that. We’re in the middle of a stealth mission!

“Looks like it all worked out, Joaquin! My guess was right on the money, huh? Our *telepatía*’s the stuff of legends, isn’t it?”

Communicating in Morse code isn’t really telepatía*, but sure. Just lower your voice.*

“Huh? Who’s this *muchacha*? Where’d you meet her?” Octavio made no effort to hide the way his gaze wandered all over Sasha’s body.

“I’m not a *muchacha*, I’m a special agent. Is he a newbie too?”

“Huh? *You’re* one of Lisa Lisa’s *guardamente*? Whoa, I didn’t think

you'd be a chick! Where's the other one?"

Sasha's brow furrowed at Octavio's utter lack of urgency at the situation (W).

"I was the only one who made it out."

"Oh, I see… Sorry. I shouldn't have asked that."

"Did you two come here on an infiltration mission?"

"I mean, I'm the one who risked his life to actually do the infiltrating. I guided this guy in after I had my meeting with Alhorn."

"You met Alhorn? Were you shot with the Arrow, too?"

"Well, he was in the middle of something… so he never got it out."

"You're injured too, by the looks of it. Were you attacked by a *Maravilla*?"

"Oh, these? They're just injuries from when I let some thugs beat me up so I could get brought here. The scrapes and bumps are from all the scratchy and pointy things I bumped into looking around this place. I had to crawl in spots."

Oh, maybe he came across Écue-Yamba-Ó too, thought Joaquin. Octavio had done some searching around the buildings after giving him orders. If the ability had been on windows and walls, there was no reason it couldn't be inside of the building as well. He wanted to compare stories with Octavio, but he was about to learn why he had no time to.

"I looked all over the place, but I couldn't find that Arrow anywhere. That damn Alhorn must love the thing so much he takes it to bed it to him. So I figured, if there was some reason he had to evacuate the place, he'd come running out with it, right?"

"Evacuate? How would we do that?"

"Well, there's a kitchen here, so we'd use the gas lines." Octavio cracked his knuckles, looking proud of himself. "I started a fire on my way here."

“Right, that could serve as a good smokescreen for our escape.”

Octavio’s bizarre plan had just rendered their attempts at stealth a *colapso*.

The first explosion rang out, making the citadel of the barriadas shake.

Judging by its scale, the flames had reached a LPG cylinder.

If that was the case, this would be no minor fire. This castle of the barriadas was filled with flammable materials.

Joaquin and the others sped back to the jail, put the immobile prisoners on gurneys, and wheeled them out. They had no choice.

Sasha glared at Octavio, the newbie who she had just met but had already taken such an outrageous course of action (W). “Que pertuto?!” She hurled a barrage of insults and neologisms at him as fierce as the snowy gales blown off the Matterhorn. Octavio prided himself on his thick skin, but even he could feel the wind being utterly taken out of his sails by her verbal assault.

“You *porrudo*! You *calabaza*! Why the hell am I stuck escaping with a worthless idiot who hasn’t even got the wisdom or sense of an earthworm?! Did you ever stop to think for a second that there were people here besides Alhorn’s little gang? Now there’s going to be a fire spreading while we’re trying to make our escape! What was Hernandez thinking, sending a *tontopora* like you here? You’re way too green for this!”

Octavio shot back his retort as he carried one of the captives, ninety percent of which was incoherent grumbling. They had no choice now but to try and escape in the midst of all this chaos and disorder. Smoke was beginning to fill the halls, and they could hear furious voices in the distance. Soot danced above their heads like flecks of night. Windows cracked in the heat, on the verge of shattering from the expanding air. Another blast shook their eyes, tempting them to turn back. Smoke stung their eyes and noses and made them tear up. The stairway guards had left their posts to fight the fire or escape, so reaching the bottom floor was simple, but they ran into more guards in the hall right in front of the bridge.

“It’s the captives! They’re over here!” they shouted, drawing their guns

and running at them.

Ugh, why'd they have to be here? Octavio put the prisoner that had been on his back onto a gurney. Sasha barked out that these soldiers didn't have *fantasmas* as they approached, her eyes not leaving them for a second.

"Of course not! They're small fries without *Maravillas*!"

After bending down, he charged them at full speed. The armed soldiers didn't seem to have been expecting that response. "What the hell?! He's unarmed! Is this guy an *otario* or *el Hombre de Acero*?!"

throwing off their aim so that they only shot the ceiling plaster. He broke their kneecaps with a few swift kicks and finally took them out with massive kicks to the face that sent their bodies whirling. They kept coming in groups of two and three. One man that looked like a career soldier with his massive arms swung at him with a huge machete but hit the wall, sending out a cascade of sparks. The soldier pulled his knife back, barely missing Octavio's shoulder with the blade. *Yikes! One blow in a place like that and it's over for me. If he got my neck with that thing, I'd lose my head for sure.* Still, Octavio only became more fierce when most would have frozen with fear. Letting out a savage cry, he grabbed the arm holding the machete and twisted it past its breaking point. As soon as the man dropped his knife, Octavio picked it up and drove it straight into its owner's chest.

"I'd never miss a chance to show off my skills," the *eroista* lover of the limelight crowed. He struck the man from his blind spot, slashed him again with the stolen machete, and finished him off with a piledriver like a *luchador*. "How's *that* for hand-to-hand combat! Well? You starting to see me in a new light?" (CH)

Sasha didn't stop to look. She was weaving her way through the enemy forces, striking them with her whip. She darted in and out of the spots where her opponents didn't want her. Her movements were swift and graceful, her hips and heels her only points of movement. (ch) She was sharp enough to avoid every counterattack, her *Overdrives* only powerful enough to knock her victims out. (wording)

I have to focus to get over this wall. I have to focus on not dying. I can't stop for a moment. I have to just focus on what's in front of me and keep charging forward. Lead the captives, push the gurneys, and head straight for the exit. If Sasha saw anything out of the ordinary, that stolen machete and her whip could deal with it.

But when she saw what was waiting for them at the bridge, her hope crumbled into dust.

A wall of soldiers blocked their only escape.

In front of them was a massive man standing like a statue made of steel.

His face was like a massive boulder, his five o'clock shadow like moss. He had a puff of jet-black, frizzled hair. His slightly receded hairline revealed a prominent forehead. Sorrow swirled deep in his sunken-in eyes, but he unflinchingly returned their gazes with a look that

could pierce straight through their bodies. The temperature in the building felt like it could have already risen by ten degrees Celsius, but the presence of this titan was like an immense ice shelf looming over them.

Sasha's hand clawed at the clothing above her scar from the Arrow. "That's him," she said, her voice shaking. "They call him Dos Santos. He's Alhorn's right-hand man, his biggest devotee who swore fealty to him. It was his *Maravilla* that got me and Messina."

"Are you the ones who started this fire?" asked Dos Santos. Octavio and Joaquin swallowed, their bodies trembling from adrenaline. Standing in their path was somebody with an ability. This was the first time one such wielder had braved the chaos and destruction to face them head-on (CH).

"You were one member of that pair who wielded those bizarre abilities…" Those eyes were on Sasha now. "I'm surprised it was the woman who survived… I haven't seen your ability in action yet. What kind of power have you manifested?"

"I haven't manifested any."

"That's not true."

"I learned the power I wield on my own, through intense training. I overcame my fears and honed it with my own willpower. That's the only power I have. I don't have any others."

“That’s not true. You were chosen. Your friend, on the other hand, was not.”

“But I haven’t seen it. I didn’t *manifest* anything.”

Perhaps she was trying to throw him off, or she couldn’t help but take pride in her status as a Ripple warrior for herself and her dead friend Messina. Sasha flatly denied every assertion the man made. As Alhorn’s second-in-command, Dos Santos cared more about witnessing the power Sasha had received from the Arrow than the fire and explosions.

“Where’s your *Jefe* now? Was he the first to escape in the fire?”

“There’s no need for you to know. He told me to not let a single person escape.”

“We’ll bring them all back alive. Now move.”

‘‘You will not. It doesn’t matter how well you can control it. Show your *Fantasma* to me, right here, right now.”

Dos Santos let out a long exhalation like an elephant. The shout he unleashed was like that of an ancient warrior rallying his courage before a battle.

“*La Casa Verde*!”

It was not a scream, and yet echoes of his words sounded in her eardrums.

Everything around him darkened as if his own personal raincloud had blown in.

Soot-colored clouds of something like smoke drifted above. Everything around her pulsed.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Strangely, the blisteringly hot air was beginning to change. She felt as if she were cheek-to-cheek with freshly burnt dead bodies.

It wasn’t just Sasha – Octavio and Joaquin seemed to be aware

of it, too. *Is that something behind Dos Santos?*

The world shook. The bridge's supports shrieked. Another explosion? An earthquake? They could hear the earth growling as if its heart had begun to beat out of rhythm. It grew louder with each beat, making Octavio and Joaquin's fields of vision quake. The air grew hotter. Their vertigo grew stronger. That pulse was undoubtedly surging up below their feet. "Hey, something's coming!" The moment Octavio said that, his surroundings changed dramatically.

Something came bursting through the floor like a deafening geyser and pierced through the roof. Trees– several huge ones, with aerial roots wrapped around their trunks. Their branches split and twisted in intricate ways, entangling with other trees' limbs at the tips. Root after root after root after root rippled over the ground beneath their feet, sending shards of tiles flying. The floor of the bridge was transforming into an uneven forest floor. The aerial roots broke through the walls around them, turning what once was cold and artificial into a *casa del árbol*. A *bosque* was forming in a 20-meter radius around Dos Santos.

It was as if *el reloj de Dios* was running fast. Octavio and Joaquin had never seen a phenomenon so majestic or destructive in their lives. They felt like they were getting goosebumps on their very souls. *All of this was caused by one person?*

It was a *boscue*, without a doubt.

A *boscue* had just grown right before their eyes.

But this was no haven. This was not a place to relax on the sun-dappled ground beneath the trees.

Aerial roots coiled around neighboring trees. Shrubs and undergrowth surged up violently from the ground. Weeds, vines, and roots all vied for the spots with sunlight and nutrients. Insect corpses littered the topsoil. Birds snapped up grubs before they could sprout wings. Bushes, boulders, and mosses suffered. A constant rain of petals fell from the canopy. Chains of cause and effect played out all throughout the ecosystem. The *bosque nativo* was caught up in the frenzy of a neverending *guerra verde*.

What powers could be at play here to make such impossible events occur? People stood petrified, their fear written all over

their faces.

“Those big trees are *Fantasmas*!” Octavio’s throat tightened. “But I can see them, and all those other guys can too!”

“The *boscue* itself isn’t the *Fantasma*,” Sasha shot back. “I saw those trees when I was first attacked. It’s a real *boscue*. It looks like Dos Santos’s ability is to make underground shoots grow at an unusual rate, then control all the plant matter that sprouts up. I only saw his real *Fantasma* for a moment. It got away from its user and sped deep into the *boscue* to hide.”

“So it brings greenery back to deserted spots – must be a pretty good *Fantasma* for the planet, huh?”

“Of course it’s not! See those aerial roots? They’re going to come right at us!”

They had no way of crossing the bridge now. Just as Sasha ordered everyone to fall back, aerial roots dangling about five meters above them from trees reared their tips back and struck like freed black mambas.

One caught Octavio’s right arm. He sliced it off with his machete right away, but the branching roots came one after the other. More lashed out from the walls and floor to grasp people’s necks, arms, and ankles like zombie hands as they fled. Screams rang out as people were jerked into the air. Octavio too was snatched and carried up. Countless roots tugged at his limbs as he dangled in midair, crucifying him.

“Whoaaa! Joaquin, hurry up and cut these roots off me!”

Octavio tossed the machete to him. Joaquin leapt off a vine to grab it and slashed off the restraints. Once he landed and Joaquin tossed him his machete back, Octavio set to slicing each and every root that ensnared the fleeing captives. Sasha and him kept withdrawing, protecting the captives all the while, but the *boscue* was coming at them from all sides. The moment one root seized a person, the others would swarm them to bind them hand and foot. No matter how much they tried to get away, the assault kept coming. It wasn’t the trees chasing them as they grew in clusters around them as they ran – it was Dos Santos himself. He appeared to be expanding his green expanse out from his *Fantasma* like a *gran incendio*.

“Don’t be scared. Just unleash your powers.”

When they turned around, they saw Dos Santos floating. He moved through the air as if he was walking across a fallen ladder, stepping on aerial roots that intertwined before him. So Dos Santos had more tricks up his sleeve – it appeared he could fully control the *boscue* itself on a whim.

“I’m not just talking to the woman. All of you who escaped captivity by yourselves have been chosen by the Arrow! Don’t let the grace I’ve bestowed upon you go to waste… you all could be the rulers of a new world. Let it out, or I’ll have my *La Casa Verde* pull it out of you!”

It was evident he was utterly possessed by Alhorn at this point. Did he intend to push them to their absolute limits in order to rip out that tightly bound presence, just like *el Jefe* did? One young man among the fleeing captives was caught in the *boscue*’s hands and jerked up. Tendrils caught his neck in a vice grip, forcing bloody foam from his throat. As if Santos was making an example of him, he lifted the choking man high into the air, binding not only his neck but also his torso and limbs. His throat caved in like an hourglass as he was strangled into unconsciousness, after which countless more roots came to drag him into the dense copse of trees.

It was a strangler tree.

Every single tree in the *boscue* was.

These were strangler figs (*Ficus carica*), tall evergreen trees found in the tropics of Peru. Their ability to weave through rocks and plants to strangle its hosts is an adaptation made to get ahead in the *guerra* over sunlight waged between plants in the unforgiving old-growth forests. When fig seeds germinate, the sprout grows towards the earth’s surface, the branching stems break through even asphalt and concrete, and they climb to the canopy while strangling other plants. Aerial roots hang down from the plant and grow more roots on contact with the ground, finally forming a trunk and causing the plant to resemble any other tree in the forest, or a forest in itself.

“Ah, ahh, ah!” Joaquin pointed to one tree’s trunk.

The vine-wrapped surface was expanding. In a spot where it split in two like a raised muscular arm, there was a huge knot at the “shoulder” resembling a sculpture of a human carved directly into the wood. It was clinging to the tree’s limbs, wreathed in roots like ropes.

(CH) *No, that's not it… That's not it!* It wasn't a sculpture, and it wasn't a tree that just happened to look like a human – it had once actually been a human. Once the roots seized a person, they either strangled them on the spot or sealed them in the trunk's surface to drain them of their nutrients. He could see other victims buried in the bark around him. Each of them had been drained of all their blood. Their eyes were clouded, their skin hardened and bark-brown as if they had been dried up, but he could spot the remains of a Peruvian police uniform among them. It appeared they were the latest victims the *boscue* had made into its own food. These trees ate people.

"Go after the user!" Sasha shouted as she deflected incoming roots.

"Easier said than done…" Octavio couldn't see a way to do it. (fix)

"These plants are going to keep growing as long as we're not on top of Santos!"

"But that bastard's just watching the fight from up there!"

Dos Santos was glaring down at them from above the broken ceiling, about 10 meters above them. He freely moved the fluttering roots like an extension of his own body, his expression devoid of any megalomania or sadism. He silently carried out this bloodbath with all the detachment of a factory worker pulling levers, looking only to complete his mission.

"I was once in the same position. Don't be scared."

The fleeing captives had scattered. They couldn't protect them anymore. Dying screams ran out as they were plucked up by roots. Vegetation pressed in all around Sasha and Octavio, looking to close the gap between them as they fought to retreat with the last few stragglers.

A root wrapped itself around Octavio's leg as he tried to run and sent him flying just before he could cut it off. Another explosion rang out, making the southwest wall collapse with the force of the shockwave and hot air. More roots through the floor and intertwined like massive legs before slamming through the cracks in the wall and snaking towards the slope outside. The trees' drastic growth was only becoming more rampant and rushed. Sasha slipped down the slope of roots like a slide as she chased after prisoners who had been seized by roots growing up from underneath them, assailed by the roots that had reached the outside, and thrown back to the ground.

This battle that had once been fought horizontally, front and back, was now joined by a vertical fight, up and down. Dos Santos came after Sasha. Floating in midair, he stared down at Sasha and the captives as they fell into dents in the roots. “Overdrive!” Sasha sent energy coursing through her braid and lashed it out, but it was blocked by roots before it could reach him. Dos Santos freely moved through the air, making no effort to enter Sasha’s long attack range.

“I’ve already seen your skills. That’s enough,” Dos Santos spat at Sasha. “Didn’t you learn anything? You couldn’t defeat me, not even with your partner.”

“…You’re doing all this, even though you know there’s people among us who survived being struck by the Arrow?”

“And what if I am?”

“You think it’s a good idea to strangle them?”

“My aim here is only to place you all in a situation where you cannot fight back or defend yourselves. That is the kind of difficult *guerra* we are all headed for. Just like this *boscue*. There, your feelings of brotherhood or kinship will not matter. All you can do is fight – strangle your own fate and struggle up towards the sunlight.”

As if manifesting the will of the unraveling Dos Santos, several more roots came rushing at Sasha.

Octavio was beginning to tire of the roots that kept coming no matter how much he slashed away.

“Dammit, where’d that Santos guy go?”

When I talked about being a eroe*, this wasn’t the kind of battle I had in mind. You don’t expect those guys to be stuck felling tree after tree like* trabadores*, do you?* Fatigue gradually set in, making his movements slower and slower. If he let his guard down even a bit, he’d snatched up by the roots and either strangled to death or have his blood and nutrients sucked out by the tree! *We need to find a way out of this mess already. Someone has to find this* boscue*’s weakness or some method to the roots’ madness.*

Figure it out! Octavio silently pleaded, swinging his machete as he frantically focused. He unleashed his instincts and aiming for his

enemies' vital points. *I'm good at that kind of thing. When my senses are sharpened, I can tell exactly where my enemies' vitals and weak points are.* It was a perceptiveness he picked up on the streets, a primal instinct, a sense for battle – he could call it anything, but whatever it was, it allowed him to see how to break through my opponents' defenses like a light in the dark… or it should have, but it did nothing against the never-ending assault of constantly-multiplying roots. No matter how much he concentrated, he couldn't see such thing.

"Dammit, I can't tell…"

All that was left for him to do now was keep up at his job as a *trabador*.

Joaquin was beginning to figure out the rules of this *boscue*.

He crept into the shadows of the building while avoiding attacks, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. His nerves reached out into the world, letting him see the afterimages of the roots' movements so that he could sort them. Every root in this *boscue* had a specific role – they couldn't all be doing the same things. To roughly categorizes the roots, the first type, *i*, was the capturing roots – they were the basic roots that went after prey and wrapped it up. Type *ii* was defense roots, which blocked attacks made on Dos Santos. Type *iii* was supporting roots that wrapped around the trunk to strengthen it. Type *iv* was breathing roots, which radiated out to the edges of the ability's range without attacking or defending, only dangling down to take in oxygen. Type *v* was absorption roots, which fastened and absorbed victims into the trunk. Type
vi was helper roots, which helped the capturing roots in ways such as whipping prey and making prey trip. These were the approximate differences between the roots.

The stars of the show, capturing roots, were easy to distinguish by their gnarled and braided surface that made them resemble muscles. They were also the most common type, and with the accompanying helper roots, getting involved with them was just a waste of energy.

What we need to go after is the breathing roots, thought Joaquin. They were the roots that dangled from the branches all above them, some nearly long enough to brush against the ground. As roots that managed airflow, they were distinguished by their feelers and tendrils

and their lack of involvement in either attack or defense.

If they were able to cut off the breathing roots, he had the feeling that it would stop Dos Santos from being able to freely maneuver through the *boscue*, even if they couldn't reach him. He wanted to work with Octavio and Sasha, but they had been split up and distanced from each other by the rapidly growing trees. This *boscue* was easy to get lost in…

He wasn't Octavio, but Joaquin couldn't help but wish that he had *telepatia* at a time like this. If he could communicate this discovery instantly, someone might be able to break through this deadlock. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to broadcast his thoughts. *Octavio, Sasha, can you hear me? The breathing roots! You need to go after the breathing roots!*

Sasha fell about 5 meters from the trunk's overhang. It took everything she had to dodge the incoming roots and protect a captive.

She fell with him protectively wrapped in his arms. The captive was a mestizo, only in his mid-teens. His nose ran as tears streamed down his face. "It's all over! It's gonna get us!" he cried out in despair. "Is it gonna strangle us once we're caught?"

Dos Santos was using his roots to descend now. He floated above them and shifted the roots, keeping his distance all the while. *That bastard sure is persistent!* He had taken his attachment to violent levels like a man pining after his *ex-esposa*. Would he focus on Sasha, or would he try to take out the people who could put up a fight and then take his time capturing the others?

Roots kept coming nonstop. She couldn't block them this time. After ripping the boy out of Sasha's arms, the roots strung them up and dangled them side-by-side.

"Can't you just take me?! Let go of the kid! Not him!"

There was no use in screaming. As vines squeezed the boy's neck, she saw more slipping into his mouth. *Stop.* More roots squeezed in. The mass of writhing snakes made made his cheeks ripple as his consciousness began to slip away. *Stop. Stop.* The boy couldn't scream anymore. Blood-red tears welled up in one of his eyes,

dripping to the ground like raindrops from eaves.

Through eyes filled with tears, Sasha saw the partner she had worked alongside for so many years dying all over again. *I couldn't protect you, Messina. We were supposed to be together forever, but then that man… that* Maravilla *was too much for us, even as a team. Does the Ripple have no way to win against such an unknown power? Is that boy's life going to fall into the clutches of this* boscue*?*

I'm weak. I'm too weak. Dawn was beginning to spill over the distant horizon. Soon, the night would be banished by the rising sun. But neither Loggins nor Messina would bet there to see it. Everything she could see was awash with a red tinge of despair. The roots clamped down around her throat. She felt consciousness slipping away. Suddenly, she remembered her *abuelo*'s face, a face she had only ever seen in his death portrait.

"Cheep. Cheep. Cheep…"

She heard some small animal crying out.

The chirping sounded incredibly weak, like it belonged to a creature that could vanish with a single touch, teetering on the brink of life and death.

It pulled her back from the edge of oblivion. "Cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep." *Where's that coming from?*

It was right beneath her. The chirping was coming from inside her hat as it sat upside-down on a root.

Dos Santos seemed to have noticed it as well. The roots around her throat loosened. Blood came rushing back into her head. Sasha caught her breath, unfurled her rope, and sent the Ripple coursing through it all in an instant. It ripped off the roots the boy was caught in, freeing him. She ripped the roots wrapped around her neck on her own and shook her body, using centrifugal force to throw off the other roots before landing on the ground.

"Oh, that's…" Dos Santos had taken enough interest in this strange development to stop the strangling. "Is that your *Fantasma*?"

Sasha's had been born from her upside-down hat – or perhaps it'd be

more appropriate to say it hatched from it.

There were baby birds overflowing inside of the hat's crown. She didn't remember preparing any magic tricks there. In fact, she wasn't even sure audience members would clap at a trick like this. They were naked, pink little things with their eyes still fused shut. They squirmed around weakly, their existences consisting only of their incessantly chirping beaks.

They kept hatching, one after another, threatening to spill over the brim.

Of course, these were not true, living chicks.

"Hey, lady, is that…"

The boy beside her rubbed his eyes. He could see them. Sasha and Dos Santos could, too. All of the Arrow survivors could.

Octavio shook with excitement.

During all his tree-felling, it finally hit him. He had figured it out as his eyes followed the roots' movements.

Some of the roots didn't participate in the attacks at all. The roots that dangled down seemed to be the same way. There were enough trees here to fill the room from end to end, but jumping on one of the dangling roots and pulling it with all his might wasn't enough to tear it. *Maybe this'll work*. A fire burned in Octavio's eyes. He climbed a root with just his arm strength, huffing as he reached the space just below the canopy. Then, he began to leap from root to root like a *mono*, huffing and puffing.

Swinging the machete in one hand, he slashed and slashed and slashed at the roots that dove at him, ripping the ones that dug into the back of his neck with brute strength, shaking off any that struck his ankles, and slicing through the ones that came in groups of two or three all at once. *Razing this place should be a cinch like this! I'll comb out all this wild hair with skills that'd put a* barbero *to shame!* With his natural courage and might, Octavio grappled with the *boscue*, aiming straight for its origin to ensure that this would be more than a particularly acrobatic show of tree-felling.

Oh, there he is!

Dos Santos was floating beyond a wall that had been destroyed in an explosion.

His back was turned to Octavio, as if he was trying to spectate crucifixions. He would aim straight for his neck.

Resisting the urge to let out a heroic war cry, he mustered all of his strength to leap from root to root. One root seemed to notice and came for him, intent on protecting the master of the *boscue*. This root was conspicuously thick compared to the others, looking like a thick rope of muscle. Octavio sucked in a deep breath and timed his leap to the next root just right. He managed to stomp on the encroaching root before landing on the next, then leapt again.

Chapter 10

Several cars approached the citadel of the barriadas as dawn neared.

As smoke and flames spilled from the building, gigantic roots burst out and lodged themselves into the ground outside, leaving most of its walls covered in vines and roots. The artificial-looking structure made for a majestic sight now, looking as if it had transformed of an ancient shrine engulfed by the rainforest. Was this strange view the work of another *Maravilla*? The black cars came to a halt beneath the roots that protruded from cracks in the walls that layered atop one another. Before the driver could walk around and open the passenger-side door, a pair of pearl gray high heels hit the ground.

Lisa Lisa had arrived. She certainly hadn't arrived in the nick of time, however. Clearly, a *Maravilla* had manifested here. They had been searching for Joaquin and Octavio all night after communications had ceased, only later coming across the signal Joaquin had left behind. As she stuck close to J.D. Hernandez and ascended the slope, two faces caught her eye among the roots - a woman she knew very well, and an unfamiliar man floating above her.

"Hernandez, that's… Sasha, isn't it?"

She couldn't stop her voice from shaking. *Oh, I've become so sentimental in my old age.*

I let my precious pupil, Loggins's descendant, be exposed to danger the moment I took my eyes off of her? Death is always but a moment away for Ripple users. That has always been a fact of life, but that

doesn't mean we ought to go seeking it out. I'm over eighty years old now – I never want to see another person younger than me throw their life away. She didn't want to regret the decision she had made to make Sasha her pupil when she had become a widow and returned to the field.

"Hernandez, do you recognize the man floating there?"

"It doesn't appear to be Alhorn, ma'am."

"Is he flying?"

Hernandez handed the binoculars he had been looking through to Lisa Lisa.

"That doesn't look to be the case. He's riding on roots that are growing up into the air. They appear to be wrapped around his hands and legs for support as well… My guess is that he's an underling of Alhorn's with a *Maravilla*."

"Quite the unpleasant sight, isn't it? It reminds me of a crane fly. But the man appears to be writhing in pain… What's that on his back?"

"It's Octavio, ma'am! He's clinging to his back!"

Gotcha! I'll be the one doing the strangling here!

Octavio had both his arms wrapped around Santos's neck like a deadlock, putting him in a sleeper hold. He stuck to him like glue, burying his own neck in the man's shoulder – he had not become another tree in the *bosque*, but the *dueño del bosque*.

Even as Octavio's arms dug into the nape of his neck, Santos managed to dig his fingers into the gaps, hanging on even as he was on the brink of being choked out. "…Let go of me, you bastard…!"

Even under the two men's combined body weight, the roots did not tear. In fact, they were trying to help by snagging on the rampaging Octavio's limbs, but caught ankles weren't enough to stop his chokehold. He kept on squeezing Santos's throat, pressing firmly to his body and concentrating his ki into his abdomen as he braced against him.

“Choke me all you want! Putting all your strength into it chokes yourself, too!”

Octavio roared. The roots seized the opportunity and dove straight into his mouth, but he bit down hard to stop them from going any further. *I better quit opening my big mouth.* He let rage surge into his arms. *I’m your parasite - if I strangle my host, it’ll wilt, and you’ll suffocate!*

Meanwhile, Joaquin was trying to get closer to his friend as he swung from root to root.

I saw Octavio jump.

No, it was more like he flew through the sky.

We’re Octavio! He always swoops in to save the day. Most of the *bosque*’s roots had rushed back to help Dos Santos, the swarm so massive that it blocked the two from his vision, but it was clear they were trying to rip Octavio off. He had to chop at least one off. Resolving that it was do or die, he searched for a breathing root to grab onto - “…Nh, nnnh, nh!” A defense root had grabbed his ankle and was dragging him away, swinging him violently through the air.

Sasha spotted her teacher down below and shouted to her at the top of her lungs.

The thirty-meter difference in elevation made it like trying to shout down to someone from a 10th-floor balcony.

“Lisa Lisa… T-Those birds, they’re…!”

“Lisa Lisa asked, ‘What about the birds?’!” Hernandez spoke in place of his superior.

“I… got struck by that Arrow too! It seems like I’ve gotten a new ability from it!”

“She said, ‘Is that what the birds are?’!”

“I can’t tell you for sure, but there’s a flock of birds I can see! They can’t fly very well yet, but they’re trying to learn with all their

might!”

She didn’t know what kind of ability it was yet. The featherless chicks twittered as they clumsily flapped their fleshy wings, only to fall back to the ground with a chirp. They appeared to have avian instincts, but it was clear they were no normal birds. As the chicks pecked, threatened, and squawked at each other indiscriminately in an apparent effort to climb to the top of the ranks, they kept on trying to fly, undaunted by their crash landings. Even when they fell head-over-heels, they quickly jumped back to their feet and aimed for the sky once again. Sasha found the creatures a bit off-putting due to their sheer, bottomless greed. They were growing far too quickly as well. Every individual varied, but there were birds whose tail and flight feathers had begun to erupt and who had begun short flights of a few centimeters. *This is my Fantasma*…

Octavio’s teeth were beginning to grind down from the force of his bite.

He had caught Dos Santos, but he still wouldn’t fall.

The ground was dizzyingly far down. If he fell now, he might end up resembling the remains of a blood-engorged mosquito.

Fear began to well up at the back of Octavio’s mind. Perhaps it would be a fitting end for a gambler like him, or karma for betraying Lisa Lisa and Hernandez. The strength waned in his arms, his vertigo grew stronger, and his consciousness began to come apart at the seams. *Hurry up and fall, you son of a bitch, or I will…*

Well, even if I fall, I’m not gonna fall alone. I’ll keep clinging onto you just like those roots, and I’ll strangle you to the last hundred-thousandth of a second before we’re both crushed by the landing.

The *bosque* grew rampant like it was flying into even more of a rage, sending massive tremors through the ground the horizontal battle was being waged on.

The night seemed to stretch on forever. Everyone was on the brink between life and death, yet the figure they expected to see there appeared before the dawn. Lisa Lisa was on the ground. Sasha

Loggins was in the middle of all the roots. Octavio was highest of all, clinging tight to the enemy.

"She says, 'He can't hold on much longer! Use the Ripple'!" Lisa Lisa spoke through J.D. Hernandez. "'Use the tool you have to send the Ripple through that man!'"

"But I can't reach that high up…"

Just when Sasha replied, she felt a tug on one end of the braid wrapped around her arm. A bird had it in its beak, pulling at it and making it unravel.

What the… Did I think of this myself, or did my unconscious order the bird to do it?

Two of the birds from the flock, which had already grown from chicks to fledglings with stunning speed, picked up both ends of the braid in their beaks. They flew with unsteady wingbeats, seeming like they could plunge back to earth at any moment, as determined as children on their first errand. One end went down to Lisa Lisa. The other went up to Octavio. The people who couldn't see *Fantasma*s saw only the braid floating supernaturally in midair. Lisa Lisa was assisted in her trek up the slope to take the end of the flying braid in her hands. She understood what had brought it to her very well.

A bird resembling a pheasant had brought the rope to Lisa Lisa. The other end of the rope was delivered to Octavio by a large, toucan-like bird. Kingfishers, cuckoos, woodpeckers, sandpipers, parrots, and countless other types of bird had hatched, but they all differed from their real-life counterparts in aspects such as color and shape. The toucan-like bird had turned out to be the fastest flyer of the flock, but even then it was too far of a journey to Octavio. Its wings weakened midway, causing it to begin to drop out of the sky. It barely managed to recover, only to fall again. Unable to stop on the treetops for a rest, it pressed forward with the braid held firmly in its beak, wagering it all on the chance that the flight would end in a safe landing. The only thing that could stop its ascent was death itself. It flapped and flapped, climbing higher in the sky.

The braid that had once been wrapped around Sasha's arm stretched taut. Sasha watched on anxiously, hoping that the toucan-like bird's wings would hold out and the braid would prove long enough. Soon the sky was lit up in a gradient of purple to red, and just as the first rays of sunlight fringed the crooked barriadas skyline, the tightened braid

formed a straight line. *Oh no… The braid's just barely coming up short.* It couldn't reach Octavio… or so she thought, but suddenly, the sphere of roots crowding around Octavio shook violently. Then Sasha saw him – Joaquin was dangling beneath the mass of roots. Now that it was weighed down by three bodies, the roots wrapped around the other two slowly began to tear and droop down. The parrot-like bird alighted on a root and hopped its way up to Octavio's elbow to wrap it in the braid.

The connection was complete.

Lisa Lisa confirmed it with a look through the binoculars. She could sense that each and every thread of the braid was conducting honed Ripple power with 100% efficiency. Her Ripple was incredibly powerful, its strength distilled with age; its platinum sparkle was warm and nostalgic. Sasha also sent as much energy into the braid as she could muster from her spot in the relay, propelling the Ripple *teleférico* grew even more forcefully. The Ripple passed through Octavio harmlessly, but shook the man caught in his arms to his core – a trick that all Ripple users knew by heart.

The Ripple surged through Dos Santos's body.

His head snapped up, his body contorting and heaving.

Those on the receiving end of a Ripple attack so skilled and concentrated wouldn't be getting up for several days – and *Maravilla* users like him were no exception.

As he fell into a dead faint, the *bosque*'s rampage finally subsided.

Joaquin too could tell that Dos Santos had just been neutralized.

It was the Ripple, and it wasn't only Sasha who had sent it through him. He could see Lisa Lisa beneath him. The markers he had made out of scrap had led her here. *Now everything's going to be okay.* He felt relief deep in his chest.

The *bosque*'s overgrowth had stopped. The roots dangled harmlessly, their assault ended. Joaquin climbed his way down them, his weight gradually bringing the ball of roots Octavio and Dos Santos were trapped in down with him.

He pushed the roots aside to find Octavio unconscious, clinging to Dos Santos. It appeared he had fainted while strangling Dos Santos, but his sheer persistence had stopped the man from escaping his grip even then. If that was the case, it was quite the wondrous event – maybe even a small miracle.

Octavio didn't wake up, even when he slapped his cheeks. Joaquin hoisted his friend on his back and carried him down the slope of vines to where Sasha and Lisa Lisa were. The women had skipped the joyful reunions and were already deep in conversation. J.D. and some other agents were hurrying into the building, apparently having learned that there were still captives inside. Joaquin bounced to keep Octavio from sliding off his back as he carefully made his way down the slippery slope. All the while, he wondered if Lisa Lisa would praise them for what they had done tonight – or would they get the scolding of a lifetime for doing something so rash on their own?

Keeping Octavio's plan to betray the Foundation and leak information a secret seemed like the best course of action. If she got wind of that, they wouldn't just be punished – they'd likely be fired from the Foundation altogether. It was true Octavio had started this fire and put the captives in danger, but no one could deny that he served a valuable role in taking Dos Santos down...

Joaquin spotted Lisa Lisa, who was beckoning him over. "Hurry over here."

She does *look a little angry…*

Hoisting Octavio up on his shoulders, he jogged towards her, wondering what kind of punishment awaited them. Suddenly, he heard something whizzing by his ear, followed by a grunt from Octavio. The next moment, red-hot pain exploded all through the right half of Joaquin's body. He stumbled, the pain making it hard to stand. *Did the flames from the building reach us?* It certainly *felt* like he was on fire. He fell to his knees, Octavio tumbling to the ground beside him.

This is what you wanted, isn't it?

He turned his face to look for the source of the voice and saw an olive-drab pickup truck in the distance. Alhorn stood in the bed, gripping a dangerous-looking crossbow. His underlings were driving several more getaway cars; it appeared they had come from some escape route hidden in the citadel. Before he could react, pain like

being turned inside-out shot all through Joaquin's body. It felt as if something was being pulled out from deep within his bones. He saw stars as the burning pain coursed through him, already close to fainting. Octavio appeared to have been jolted awake by the pain – he was crawling across the ground, screaming in agony. Something thin and long sped through the air back towards the truck Alhorn was in.

Did that hurt? Well, pain's to be expected after getting struck by the Arrow. You two were chosen.

Alhorn's voice stabbed into his brain. At this distance, his voice shouldn't have been audible, but it was invading Joaquin's body and mind like a cancer.

Now he was sure that it was the Arrow he had seen flying back to Alhorn, jerked back at the end of something long and thin like a bowstring. That was when Joaquin understood. *I just got shot. Not only me, but Octavio, too.* The crossbow had fired that Arrow straight through Octavio's left thigh and into the right side of Joaquin's torso.

We never thought something like this'd happen, but it looks like you've done a pretty good bit of damage to us. So take this Arrow – take this branching of your fate that you wanted so badly. Your entire world's about to change, and you can never go back to how it was before. You're the newest additions to my list of people I'm excited to meet again someday.

Alhorn retrieved the Arrow he had pulled back and smiled. All Joaquin could see inside of his open mouth was a pitch-black void. He looked like he had just awoken from some daze, his expression absent of grief or resentment –a perfect glimpse into Alhorn's true nature. That was the face of a man who had shot countless people with the Arrow, who had no qualms with leaving his right-hand man behind with the enemy. The cars lined up and sped off. Had they decided to retreat without fighting their pursuers, or did they have more pressing matters to attend to somewhere else?

At the edges of his burning pain, of his faint consciousness, Joaquin heard several voices echoing together. They were calling his and Octavio's names. Lisa Lisa, Hernandez, and Sasha were all running to them, the rising sun behind their backs – or that's how it felt, but it could have

all been his imagination. Joaquin didn't know anymore. Perhaps he was hearing the screams and footsteps of his own approaching

Fantasma.

Everything around him fell away, melting into pure darkness.

Chapter 11

It was nighttime.

It felt as if Joaquin was constantly swirling in a cloud of intense dizziness, but also utterly still at the same time.

He regained consciousness like he was surging out from a pool of water, only for sleep to pull him back in like mud. Perhaps he was trying to drift somewhere, but he could do nothing to control his trajectory. It was like he could only watch the world in a daze through frosted glass, sighing enviously. Maybe Alhorn was right. Maybe everything *had* changed in that single moment, and he could never return to the past again. Now that he was drifting in and out of consciousness several days after being shot with the Arrow, Joaquin couldn't help but think about the change both his and Octavio's fate had gone through.

It was nighttime.

Every time he opened his eyes, it was nighttime.

He had lost his sense of how much time had passed long ago.

It appeared he and Octavio had been brought to the Foundation's infirmary to be given first aid and then undergo surgery. Joaquin had been confined to his bed for a while, but a series of doubts plagued his mind. *Does my being awake now prove that I was chosen by the Arrow? Will I end up like Sasha Loggins, or will I get weaker and weaker until I end up like Messina? What about Octavio?* Everyone in the Foundation was exhausted and perplexed. Medical officers, investigators, and researchers like Domingo and Aki Marcella would appear to Joaquin in the infirmary to record all kinds of data, take readings, and ask him how he was feeling, but Octavio never came. In fact, everyone seemed suspicious of him, treating him like he was an entirely different person. Their eyelids seemed thick and heavy, the eyes behind them full of undisguised melancholy, and they looked exhausted as they came and went from the infirmary. Could they be judging him for his reckless actions that day, or were they seeing bad news in his data – something pointing to a *Fantasma* in his future?

Joaquin felt more ennui and loneliness with every passing day. His wound from the Arrow still hurt, but not terribly – he should have appreciated being bedridden after rest being a luxury in Antigua and the barriadas, but instead he was far more tired than if he had worked himself to the bone running around. Not having Octavio nearby felt like half of his body had been torn away. He could hardly breathe, much less think.

“Well, let’s see… it looked like a *rábano* covered in fibrous roots. Light filtered through its body like it was made out of water. It can solidify itself, but not all at once. It coagulated together the way salt appears when you evaporate seawater, disintegrating into woodchips as it did.”

Sasha too looked haggard as she wearily explained what she had seen of Dos Santo’s *Fantasma* on that night. Talking with a person who had already been struck by the Arrow lifted Joaquin’s spirits somewhat. The conversation was entirely one-sided on Sasha’s part, but she

was able to reassure him that she saw no *Fantasma* near him. “I don’t know if it depends on the individual or if it only comes out when you’re backed into a corner like I was, but I’m just glad you made it through okay,” she said. “Lisa Lisa’s truly happy you’re okay, too.”

Several nights later, Lisa Lisa appeared as well. Worried about his condition, she told him to focus on resting for the time being. J.D. and the other agents seemed to have their hands full with their pursuit of Alhorn, but tonight Lisa Lisa didn’t discuss the investigation or search.

I want to hear your story, wrote Joaquin on a piece of paper.

“I’m younger than the Louvre, but older than the Museum of Modern Art. Listening to the story of an old lady like me will take quite a while,” she said with a warm and friendly smile, seemingly fighting back sleep.

“After a hard-won battle, I regained a comfortable sort of faith in the world. I also came to believe in the value of orderliness once more. But history has a way of wandering down the same dark paths over and over again. Back when I was traveling the world, carrying out philanthropic and humanitarian work with my late husband, I would hear echoes of past curses at times. War after war broke out in the Asian peninsula, human rights issues plagued the world, and blood-drenched killers like Alhorn were born. Our company seemed peaceful

at one time, but that only meant that disasters and tragedies were playing out in some far corner of the Earth. I believe the generation succeeding us will inherit our struggles to make the world a better place, and that is exactly why we must properly let control over the era go to them. I've decided to whip these old bones into action for as long as my power is needed, and to leave behind a legacy once it is not."

Joaquin listened closely to Lisa Lisa's story of her past. Even in the moonlit infirmary, he could sense the atmosphere of the times she had lived in. *We're part of her story, and Lisa Lisa's going to be part of the story Octavio and I will be weaving from now on,* he realized.

He glanced up to see Lisa Lisa looking out the window, rubbing her eyes with a melancholy look on her face. As she met his gaze again, the corners of her mouth pulled up in an awkward smile.

"I take full responsibility for what your bodies have been going through," she said, squeezing Joaquin's hand. "You manage to escape death with your own strength, but Octavio…"

Joaquin's eyes widened. Had Lisa Lisa come so she could tell him about Octavio before anyone else?

"If I'm being honest, we have no idea whether he was chosen by the arrow or not. He was in even more critical a state than you – he truly was at risk of losing his life. He contracted an infection in his left thigh where he was shot, and gangrene began to spread. Analysis that the bacteria contained within the arrowhead was spreading all throughout his body. We had no choice but to amputate his left leg."

Fear stole the breath from Joaquin's lungs.

Octavio's leg was amputated?

Several days later, Octavio's condition stabilized, and Joaquin was allowed to visit.

It was nighttime. Octavio looked completely different from anything Joaquin had imagined.

He was deathly pale, with stark blue blood vessels visible through the skin of his jaw. He wasn't seething with rage – he didn't even bother to wipe the tears from his cheeks. He just laid in the bed listlessly, his eyes half-lidded.

"Oh, it's you."

What spilled from his dry lips sounded more like sounds than words. His vigor, might, ambition, and heroic spirit had all vanished. He no longer expected others to know his name. He didn't even seem to be aware of the fact that his left leg was gone from the thigh down.

"You sure look healthy… Guess that means I'm *frio*, and *te quemas*."

We don't know that yet. Joaquin silently shook his head.

"Has your *Fantasma* shown up yet?"

Joaquin shook his head.

"But still, why did it get to be you? Why wasn't it me?"

That was all he had to say. He had been hungrier, thirstier, more excited for that door to open than anybody else, but it had opened for his partner and not him. Mixed anger, yearning, resentment, isolation, fatigue, and nostalgia gushed forth from his heart, none of them properly taking form. In the end, Octavio's face simply looked blank and rather dull. He exchanged no thoughts with the man he had always been able to communicate with in silence. Maybe that was why Lisa Lisa and the others hadn't let them meet until now. Now that Joaquin's luck had changed, it was like Octavio had become an entirely different person.

"Damn it, I'm even missing a leg…"

His jaw hung slack as he stared up at the ceiling. He had been knocked down so hard that his soul seemed to be in some far-off abyss.

Joaquin came back to visit every day, but Octavio's condition never changed. Whether he was in rehabilitation or in his bed, he did nothing but mutter deliriously, devoid of any desire. He

never yelled. He never smiled. He just existed. He was awake, but not there – his eyes had become two black pits.

Several days later, Joaquin made the decision to leave the investigation team.

It was nighttime when he decided.

I know for a fact that I've awakened to a Maravilla*.*

His *Fantasma* had not shown itself to him yet, but he knew he had manifested its power. He was convinced of it. Everything in the world existed ahead of his consciousness, far more precisely than his five senses ever could. It was as if he had been looking through the wrong pair of glasses his entire life, but now the impure blood had been sucked away, bringing everything into focus. *But I can't control this power at all.*

Joaquin looked out the window.

It was nighttime.

All he had seen was the waxing and waning of the moon. The sun was never visible.

That's strange. Something's wrong, he kept thinking.

He lifted his upper half off the bed and slowly squeezed his hand shut. A sticky substance welled up between his fingers as if his hand was wounded – but it wasn't blood. Jet black beads of something like tar slowly fell through the gaps in his fingers. When they hit the floor, the drops formed a crown before bursting open. A small black whirlpool formed on the spot, becoming dark as night as it silently swirled and grew larger and larger. *This is the* night – *it's* night *itself,* Joaquin intuited.

That's right. This is my Maravilla*.* What swirled there was blinding, opaque darkness. A vacuum, a destructive black hole from outer space. A puddle in *monocromo* black.

I'm not waking up whenever it's nighttime. It's nighttime whenever I'm awake.

The live broadcast on the infirmary's TV showed a sunlit world, and there were no panicked headlines about the world being shrouded in permanent night. Sasha, Hernandez, and all the investigators and researchers of the investigators had been going through their mornings and days as normal – or at least, they had as long as they stayed away from Joaquin…

Whenever I'm awake, this entire room is plunged into nighttime*. I don't understand the theory of it at all, but I can see that the sky outside is dark, and every person who comes to visit can barely stay awake. They turn sluggish like their internal clock's going haywire, become completely exhausted, and look haggard. Even the temperature drops and bouquets brought for*

me wilt. Just like how Dos Santos was able to manifest a forest within ten meters of him, I can blanket my surroundings in night*, whether the sun is in the sky or not.*

That's right. It's clear that my power's darkness is growing deeper and stretching farther. When he peered into the briefing room, overtaken by curiosity about how the researchers could be analyzing this power, he was terrified. The clock on the wall said it was 2 PM, yet the people inside were all collapsed on the ground in a deep sleep, their eyes closed, their mouths still, their jaws slack, their limbs dangling limply like those of dead, strung-up animals. Not a single person in the room escaped sleep – not even Lisa Lisa or Sasha.

At the faces of these people caught in a slumber like temporary death, in this frozen time, Joaquin felt acidic despair soak into his entire body. Is this what *te quemas* was supposed to be like? This power wasn't a blessing at all. The true curse, the true power of the *Fantasma*, this power to bend the laws of nature, was flowing unchecked and unlimited.

Thus, he decided to leave. He had learned his lesson - he couldn't stay there anymore. Staying there would be detrimental to Lisa Lisa and the others' mission. He would only impede their great cause. He could cause some tragic, fatal accident, or perhaps he'd have an even more terrifying influence than that. He had finally found his place, but life was unfair. He unsteadily wandered the quiet hallways, and once he walked past a certain sickroom, he found the one and only person who had not fallen asleep. Octavio watched Joaquin through heavy-lidded eyes, his mind in a daze.

You're leaving, aren't you?

Are you gonna leave me behind?

You think you can just vanish on your own?

Octavio stared at him with desperate, hollow, glazed, half-lidded eyes, but Joaquin knew it was him he was addressing. He hesitated for a few moments, worried, then offered Octavio his shoulder and lifted him up. He knew that was what Octavio wanted, and that was what Joaquin wanted to do. Soon, they left the Foundation base behind. *We've always been together… so it's fine for me to have him help me seal away this power, isn't it?*

It was nighttime.

The weeds beneath Joaquin's feet crumbled to ash.

He couldn't even see a trace of the sun as it moved, completely hidden by the gloomy clouds.

There was always their hometown, but he had no home to tug him back towards it. The two of them had no relatives. In fact, it could be said they had simply returned to their former life as wanderers.

With the now one-legged Octavio riding in the cart they had once used for scrap collection, Joaquin walked towards a place devoid of people, avoiding towns on the way. He climbed a mountain and then descended the watershed's southern slope, gazing at the dead trees at the sides of the road. They came to a stop beneath a stone bridge, finding the river it crossed stagnant and filled with gray foam. No fish swam through the water. Every living being in the area was dormant. He continued on without food or water; he had not slept at all, but he felt no fatigue. Joaquin honestly wasn't even sure whether he would die or not. There were several times when Octavio suddenly woke up in a panic and rolled around on the back of the cart in an effort to get up, shouting that his leg was gone. He couldn't seem to understand that it had been amputated, horror gripping him again every time he woke up. When Joaquin calmed him down and he finally accepted it, weak laughs spilled from his lips like a leaking faucet. It seemed those bold war cries and bluffs would never fall out again, even if he was turned upside-down.

Let's go to a place with nobody and nothing in it and breathe new life into it. We'll make our own order and rituals out of nothing in the silence.

Joaquin had sentenced himself to exile. His own banishment was a decision made in secret and in the span of a single night. In his footsteps, his uncontrollable power left plants wilted and the surface of the earth covered in darkness. Roadside trees were dyed black like candles burned for some pagan god, life's warmth dissipated, and rivers and lakes were chilled all at once, freezing the creatures living there. It all happened under the blanket of night. Night utterly devoid of light.

In this world of never-ending night, words cursing this transformation spilled from battered, cracked lips. Words denouncing the irreversible transformation the Arrow had wrought. Joaquin secluded himself from the world alongside Octavio, chasing away all the memories he held into the furthest depths of their minds, letting time float away on the wind, and vanishing from the stage of history.

All with the ability that would be dubbed **El Aleph** in later years by the Speedwagon Foundation at his side…

His journey brought him to a deep threshold of darkness.

It was Peru's eastern border, the edge of a rainforest that took up an entire continent.

In an empty rowboat, Joaquin and Octavio paddled up the great Amazon River.

Translation: Cinda